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NOVEL
25

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

Table of Contents

[Color Inserts](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Someone Notices Something Amiss](#)

[Chapter 2: At the Bottom of the Ravine of the Earthwurm](#)

[Chapter 3: A Shot at Victory](#)

[Chapter 4: The Mad Dog King vs. the Former Sword God](#)

[Chapter 5: Kalman III vs. Kalman II and Co.](#)

[Chapter 6: Kalman III vs. Dead End and Co.](#)

[Chapter 7: Alexander vs. Rudeus](#)

[Chapter 8: Rest](#)

[Chapter 9: Making Peace with the Ogre God](#)

[Interlude: The Armor](#)

[Interlude: I Wanted to Be a Hero](#)

[Character Designs](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Newsletter](#)

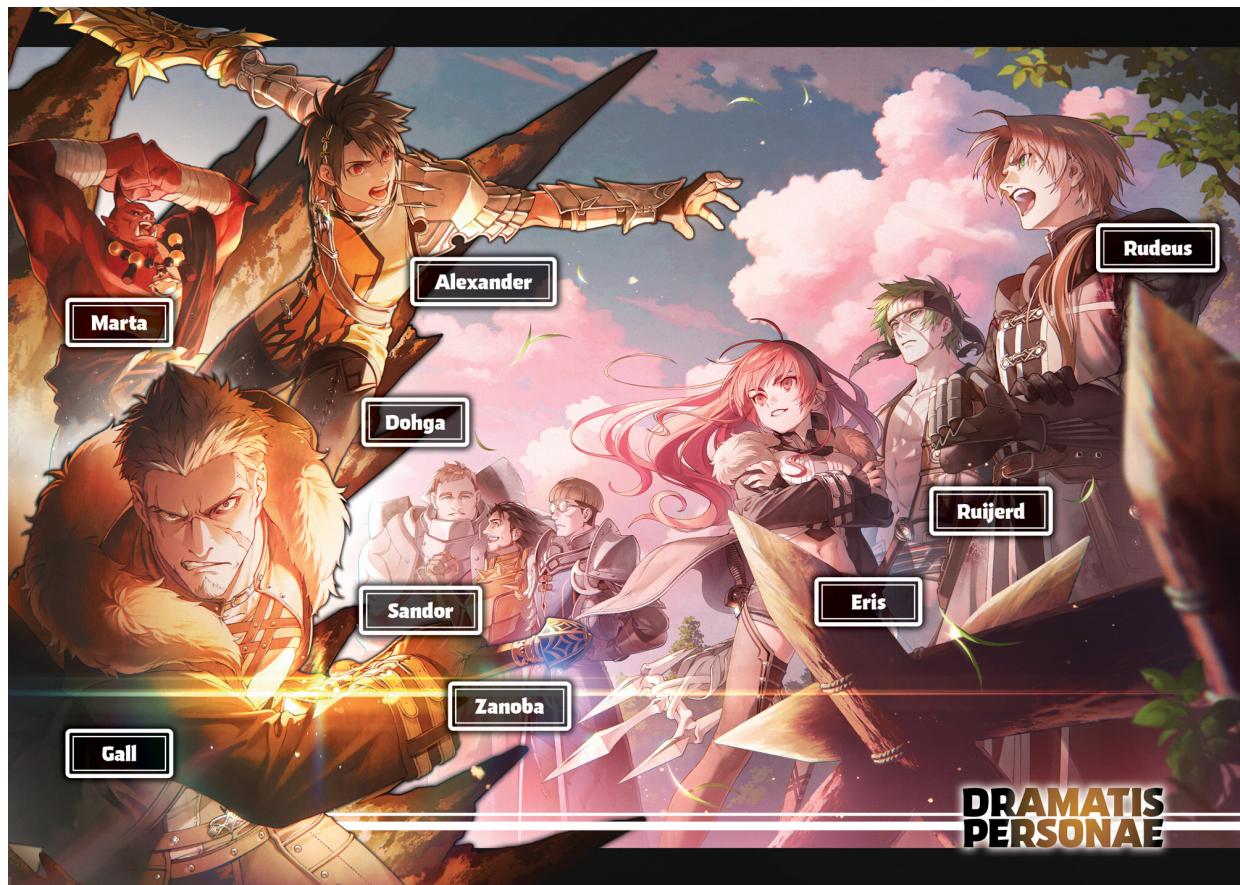
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This was it. This was a crossroads.
This was where I saw if I could
muster all my power and get
serious.

**“...I am Rudeus ‘Quagmire’
Greyrat, follower of the
Dragon God.”**

**“I am Alexander Kalman
Rybak, the North God!”**

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Contents

- CHAPTER 1:** Someone Notices Something Amiss
- CHAPTER 2:** At the Bottom of the Ravine of the Earthwyrm
- CHAPTER 3:** A Shot at Victory
- CHAPTER 4:** The Mad Dog King vs. the Former Sword God
- CHAPTER 5:** Kalman III vs. Kalman II and Co.
- CHAPTER 6:** Kalman III vs. Dead End and Co.
- CHAPTER 7:** Alexander vs. Rudeus
- CHAPTER 8:** Rest
- CHAPTER 9:** Making Peace with the Ogre God
- INTERLUDE:** The Armor
- INTERLUDE:** I Wanted to Be a Hero

*“Potential for growth comes when you push
beyond 100 percent.”*

—Seventy percent effort will give you stability in life.

*AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT*

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Chapter 1: Someone Notices Something Amiss

IN A SMALL TAVERN tucked away in the Second City of Ireilil, the second largest city in the Biheiril Kingdom, Sandor von Grandour and a young man were having a drink.

“...So, you’re saying the monkey-faced demon left the Second City of Ireilil for the capital, then vanished?”

“Yeah. His mug’s supposed to be unique, so I reckon it’s true.”

“After that?”

“I dunno... Hey, I swear I don’t know any more than that! I’m just speculatin’, but I reckon he caught wind that you was after him and did a quick vanishing act.”

The informant speaking to Sandor was little more than a boy, but that boy knew more rumors of the Biheiril Kingdom than anyone else. Either he was older than he looked, or he was a pawn of the real information broker.

“Hey, mister,” said the boy abruptly, “I’ve got a juicy story—only it’ll cost you extra.”

Sandor pulled a silver coin out of his pocket and clunked it down in front of the boy, who scooped it up quickly into his pocket.

“You hear about the devils in the forest?” he asked.

“Devils?”

“Yeah, you know the ones. Turns out, they’re them *Superd*. Some foreign adventurer made ’em angry, so they slaughtered a whole village.”

“Gosh. Nasty people who’ve moved in,” Sandor said.

“They say the kingdom’s gonna send out a hunting party any day now. I hear tell the forest devils make invisible beasts fight for ’em, so who knows how bad the fallout’ll be...”

The remainder of the boy’s story was made up of extremely exaggerated rumors. There was nothing to confirm it for sure, but it

sounded like gossip someone might spread on purpose. That someone was obviously Geese.

“Anyway, point is, right now they’re recruiting for the hunting party, so I figure that monkey-faced demon what you been looking for might be hiding in their ranks.”

“I see,” Sandor said. “You’ve given me a lot to go on. Cheers.” He paid the informant another copper coin, then exited the tavern. Outside, night had fallen completely. It was mostly quiet around the backstreet tavern, but he could hear a commotion.

“I want to get this information to Rudeus as fast as possible,” Sandor murmured, “but it’s late.” His words melted into the empty night.

According to the plan, Rudeus was supposed to have come back to town that day with the two soldiers. He’d rendezvous with Sandor in the Second City of Irelil, then they’d go on together to the capital of Biheiril to conduct negotiations. The sun had long set, and Rudeus had not returned.

If that were all, Sandor wouldn’t have worried. He’d have assumed that, Rudeus being who he was, he’d simply gotten carried away talking up the Superd Village to the soldiers.

“First things first, let’s let the Dragon God know.” Sandor went back to his room to share his information. He had a contact tablet in his room. If he used it to get in touch with the others, they might know the source of the rumors and what was delaying Rudeus. *Dear me. What modern conveniences. Or rather, I suppose that’s the power of the Dragon God.* He turned his gaze to the contact tablet.

“Eh?” The other day, when Rudeus had used it, the tablet had emitted a constant blue glow. Now it looked like an ordinary lump of rock and nothing more.

“...Are you broken?” Sandor gave the tablet a casual rap with his fist, and the part he’d touched just crumbled away.

“Whoa, now...” he said, as his inner voice immediately cried, *I broke it!* It had gone dim at some point before he got back, so he chose to believe that it had already been fragile.

“This is a pickle, though...” he muttered. Sandor was confident in handling magical implements. In his life thus far, he was proud to say he’d handled more than your average number of them. He’d also broken more than your average number, and he was *not* confident in his ability to fix them.

“Hmm.” If he couldn’t fix it, he couldn’t confirm his information. He worried over this for a few seconds, then made up his mind.

“Guess I’ll head back.” Perhaps it was different for other people, but he knew that if he were left to his own devices, it wouldn’t lead to anything good. He turned to the teleportation circle.

But—

In that basement, Sandor looked in silence at the teleportation circle. It should have been ready to use, but it wasn’t glowing. Sandor’s alarm bells rang louder. His magic communication implement was broken, and now his magical means of transportation was out of operation. Sandor was an experienced warrior, so he sensed when he was in a trap. This was a perfectly crafted dead end—a cramped basement with nowhere to run. It was a location *begging* for a surprise attack. His extensive fighting experience brought him visions of enemies blowing up the upper floor and burying him alive... But no, they would have blown it up by now if that were the plan. His foe must want to do it with their own hands to ensure he was dead.

“How about you show yourself already?” he said, turning to the entrance to the basement. Their plan was probably to lie in wait at the exit until Sandor panicked and tried to leave, then *stab*—knife in the back. Sandor was used to surprise attacks.

He put on a brash voice and said, “I know you’re there.” He pointed his weapon—a staff—at the exit. He hadn’t sensed anything, but he figured he ought to expect as much from someone who’d come to kill him. He waited. There was no response. Foolish of them, when he’d already found them out.

Sandor snorted, then walked forward with a light step, like he was going for a nice walk. Anyone who knew what to look for would get chills seeing that power walk. Thus Sandor left the basement, casting his gaze about to catch the moment the attack came. Whenever it happened, he

would be ready. He kept it up all the way outside. There, a battalion of soldiers lying in wait for him...was nowhere to be found. The street was deserted. When Sandor emerged with his staff readied for combat, a passerby shot him a suspicious look.

He set off down the street. He cut a suspicious figure with his staff still gripped in his hands; a buzz of interest swept over the townsfolk. Sandor paid them no attention. That was how he strode through the town gates and out of the town. Seeing from his movements that he was no ordinary passerby, the guards let him get out of town without impeding his departure. Perhaps if he had tried to enter the town from the outside, they would have moved to stop him, but there was no need to call out to someone who was leaving.

Sandor got out safely. Even then, he didn't lower his staff. He walked until he could no longer see the walls of the town. When he arrived at an empty plain with good visibility, he let his guard down at last, and without a moment of hesitation, he set off running. He was heading for the Superd village. Something was terribly wrong. If he wasn't the target, someone else was.

“...I really did think someone was there,” he said to himself. As he remembered what he'd said back in the basement, he went a little pink.

Sandor made haste to the forest of the Superd village and didn't stop at any towns or villages on the way. He hadn't been attacked back at the teleportation circle, but he was on his guard against an ambush. Whether he was deterring his would-be attackers or there just hadn't been any assailants in the first place, he couldn't say, but his journey passed without incident. He exited the forest and approached the ravine. When he went to cross the shudder-inducing depths, Sandor suddenly realized something was wrong.

“There's no bridge...?” The stone bridge that Rudeus had built had collapsed partway in. It had *looked* extremely sturdy, but he supposed it had only been a makeshift thing built with magic in the end. Sandor didn't know much about magic, but he vaguely knew that this sort of dashed-off magic

bridge was prone to collapsing. It didn't strike him as odd. What caught his notice was the original bridge next to the broken one. There was something on the ground near it: the scabbard of a sword. If his memory served, it was the one the regular soldiers of the Biheiril Army carried.

"...What's this doing here?" he wondered aloud, his alarm bubbling up once again. He knew his own instincts well enough that when something felt wrong, he wasn't imagining it. Of course there were times he read too much into things, but still, he could trust his gut.

Looking around the bridge to ensure he was alone, he slowly began to cross it until, when he was partway across, he was greeted by a familiar sight. Splotched, black stains. Bloodstains. He couldn't tell whose, but judging by the color, they were likely human. The blood appeared to have come flying from the broken stone bridge.

The bridge had collapsed. There was a scabbard lying near the original bridge. Sandor furrowed his brow as he pieced together a theory.

"Does that mean Rudeus and the soldiers were attacked on the bridge?"

He set off sprinting. He was across the bridge in a moment, safe on the opposite side. He'd feared attackers hemming him in on the middle of the bridge, but even now that he was on the other side, no attack came. At the end of the bridge, he kept his staff raised for a few seconds, looking for danger. When he knew there was nothing coming, he set off running again.

As Sandor approached the Superd village, he entered stealth mode. From afar, he confirmed that no enemy was occupying the village...and then some Superd warriors came out from the village to greet him. He confirmed he wasn't a threat, and thus they ambled back to the village.

Sandor headed for the residence of the warrior who—though still recovering from illness—he could trust most.

"Master Ruijerd!"

Ruijerd was eating with Rudeus's younger sister, Norn, but when Sandor came running in he stood up at once, ready to fight. It was the kind of quick shift you only saw in a legendary hero. Sandor felt his heart flutter.

“What happened?”

“Where is Master Rudeus?” he asked.

“He left the village with his soldier escort a few days back.”

That was where it hit Sandor. “I think someone—maybe from the Second City, maybe the Earthwurm Ravine Village—attacked him on the bridge! Rudeus is missing! Form a search party!”

“Understood!” Ruijerd picked up his spear and ran out of the house.

“Huh...?!” Norn gaped. “Huh...?!” She hadn’t followed the conversation and gaped in bewilderment and alarm. Sandor smiled kindly at her.

“Fear not, Miss Norn,” he told the confused girl. “Your brother is the right hand of the Dragon God. He won’t go down easily. You can count on that. I’m sure he survived the attack and he’s hiding out somewhere. Have no doubt that I will save him!”

“Uh—um, okay.”

With that, Sandor ran to the village square where Ruijerd, who worked fast, had assembled five warriors.

“We’re ready to go.”

“Then let us be off.” The warriors, like Norn, couldn’t conceal their confusion, but their quick response showed their training. They followed Sandor without a single objection.

They ran through the forest. A few Invisible Wolves crossed their path along the way, but the Superd warriors put them down with ease, as though they were brushing aside branches. In no time, they arrived at the ravine. When Ruijerd saw the unremarkable stone bridge Rudeus had made, his brow furrowed.

“There are signs of a fight. The bridge has collapsed.”

Trust a legendary warrior to see all that at a glance, Sandor thought, his heart fluttering again. Suddenly, Ruijerd’s eyes went wide, and he ran out onto the bridge. That was where the specks of blood Sandor had seen were.

“This is Rudeus’s blood,” Ruijerd said.

“So he *was* attacked here?”

Ruijerd didn’t reply, only went further down the bridge toward the side leading to the Earthwurm Village. When he reached the end, he knelt and stared intently at the ground.

“Rudeus’s footprints aren’t here,” he said. Sandor automatically looked into the ravine. There’d been an attack on the bridge, and now on the other side, there were two sets of footprints, neither of them Rudeus’s.

Which meant...

“He was killed and thrown off?” Sandor asked. Ruijerd was silent, but from his grave expression, he guessed the likelihood was high.

Even supposing Rudeus wasn’t dead, the ravine beneath them was teeming with Earth Dragons. Rudeus was a powerful magician, but even he couldn’t make it out of such a place alone.

Sandor was deliberating on what to do when suddenly, Ruijerd crouched down at the edge of the precipice and began lowering his legs over it.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Sandor asked.

“That’s obvious.”

“...I know how you feel, but if we go into the ravine with this lineup, we’re not coming back out.” Ruijerd might be a legendary warrior, but down at the bottom of the ravine was an Earth Dragon den. They would end up in grave peril if they went, and that was a guarantee. They’d be throwing away their lives for nothing.

“Then what *should* we do!?” Ruijerd demanded.

Sandor pondered this. It was a tricky situation, no mistake. In the first place, they didn’t know for certain that Rudeus had fallen into the ravine. They couldn’t even rule out the possibility that the other two had set off for the village carrying him, slight though that possibility was.

“...Oh.” That was when Sandor remembered something. He’d set up insurance so that this wouldn’t happen.

“How many sets of footprints were there on the way to the bridge?” he asked.

Ruijerd glared, as though angry at the irrelevant question, but he answered. “Four.”

Sandor looked around at their surroundings. He saw only empty forest. No trees had fallen, nor was the earth torn asunder. It was peaceful. Having confirmed this, he set off running. He was heading for the end of the bridge. The side that led to the valley village. There, Sandor turned his attention to the ground. He saw a single footprint. It was a distinctive one, larger than that of an ordinary man, but not outside the mold of a human. He turned back to Ruijerd.

“Confirm this for me again. You only found Master Rudeus’s blood, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s all right, then,” Sandor said decisively.

“What?”

“Let’s leave Master Rudeus for the moment,” Sandor said. “I expect our enemies are on their way.” No sooner had the words left his mouth than Ruijerd seized him by the collar.

“You mean to abandon Rudeus?” he demanded.

“I do not,” Sandor replied calmly. “I give you my absolute guarantee that Master Rudeus will return to us.” His words were full of a conviction that made them strangely persuasive. Ruijerd was still confused, but he slowly released Sandor.

Chapter 2: At the Bottom of the Ravine of the Earthwurm

WHEN I WOKE UP, I was in a white place. My body had reverted to the way it was in my past life, a realization that washed over me with a sense of powerlessness. I hadn't felt that in a long time. With it, the feeling of defeat. I'd lost. Ruijerd had been the bait, and I'd fallen for it. After beating Vita, I'd let my guard down and contacted the Biheiril Kingdom, which let Geese know where I was. I'd ended up rolling out the welcome mat for the former Sword God *and* the North God. Thus I'd wound up in that mess alone, with enemies on both sides. It made me sigh just thinking about it.

Geese had been watching closely. I hadn't expected to lose the use of all my magic once my arms were cut off at the root. He'd chosen the location perfectly, too. Naturally, I couldn't summon the Version One on the bridge. He must have decided in advance to force the fight in a location like that. Thanks to the system Roxy built, I didn't need to draw out a magic circle anymore, but Geese didn't know that...

Well, those two weren't about to lose to me in the Version Two. It looked like they hadn't anticipated that the bridge couldn't withstand the updated Version Two stamping down on it. I suppose there *had* been an escape route—below me.

So where *was* Geese? Had he disguised himself as the king of the Biheiril Kingdom? The voice had been different...but we're talking about Geese here. Imitating a voice was within his abilities. Besides, it'd be a piece of cake with the Man-God's assistance.

Wait a minute, though. Sandor was suspicious too. His voice and face and physique didn't resemble Geese, but with a magical implement, or a magic item, he could have changed those. Maybe he'd infiltrated the Asuran Kingdom from the start and tied up the leader of the golden knights or something. The dude was good at getting information—*too* good—so it was very possible.

Man, it felt like there'd been a lot of these machinations lately. It was the same with Abyssal King Vita using dreams to mount a psychological attack.

Whoa, are you actually a slime creature? I bet that pixelation filter isn't to hide your identity. You were actually a slime all this time!

No reply.

Asshole! I'm talking to you. Say something. I look like a dumbass talking to myself. Now that I've lost, you could at least show up to gloat while revealing your plans. That's what the bad guy does, so go for it. Tap me on the shoulder and say, "Nice try, but I win. Too bad, eh? Hur hur."

Why was he waiting? My fists wanted a final word, at least.

“...Go die in a hole.”

Already did. So what's the story, Man-God baby? Your pixelated mosaic filter's not working so well. Feeling down?

“Every time you do something, my future changes.”

Yeah. That's the idea.

“I can always see my own future. I can see *all* the way into my future.”

Yep, I know. You have future vision. For three people at max, right... huh? Does that include you? Can your third disciple even see their own future?

“Three? I can see more than that. I just can't take my eyes off my own future. That's why only three.”

Meaning...it takes most of your power to see your own future?

“It's like my future was red. There was a moment where it went dark.”

Whatever. Paint it black.

“At first, it was just Orsted. Orsted's nothing. He's not *my* enemy. I'd never lose to such a simple-minded moron.”

Moron...? Okay, Orsted is a bit thick sometimes. Like when he didn't say anything about the Superd... Not that I'm one to talk.

“In that moment, a man appeared beside Orsted. A man I didn’t know. Total blank. I think he wasn’t of this world. Since then, things have gotten a little darker.”

Ohh. Are you talking about Nanahoshi’s boyfriend? What’s his name again?

“They soon increased. A girl. Since then, my future has been dark and quiet. Every time you do something, Orsted’s allies increase. Every time, my future grew darker. Now, it’s all black.”

Cool. So what I’ve been doing wasn’t for nothing.

“Oh, it was. I’ll *make* it nothing.”

That’s nasty. Whatever. If I’m already dead, nothing I can do about it.

“If you die, there’s still time. This created future only came about because of one guy. I can overturn it by killing humans with strong fates. That’s what I’ve done all this time.”

Do you want me to beg for my life...? Press my head to the ground and plead, “Please, just spare my family!” Probably impossible at this stage, though, given the circumstances.

“Just die. Die, *die*.”

“*Die, die.*” *What are you, eight years old?*

“Die in hell, Rudeus.”

Listen to me, damn it!

My eyes opened. I felt terrible. Having someone tell you to go die to your face like that really puts you in a rotten mood. Still, for all that he’d told me to “go die,” he hadn’t said, “I’m gonna kill you.” There’s a lesson in there about how the Man-God relies on people, or...something. He didn’t do his own dirty work; all he did was issue orders from on high. Bastard.

Anyway.

“So I’m alive,” I said. I’d thought I was dead for sure. The Upgraded Magic Armor Version Two was extremely tough, but I was still flesh and blood. I’d blacked out. Jeez, that height. No way could my body have survived the shock of that fall, yet here I was, awake, so I must have survived. Had something cushioned my fall? It didn’t look like there were any trees down here...

Anyway, thank you, Dada Paul and Mama Zenith, for making such a sturdy son.

“Ngh.” I sat up. It was dim around me. Maybe a cave. Something felt weird. Just now, when I’d sat up. What did I do that with? I tensed my core muscles, then pushed up on my elbow...

“Huh? I have *arms*.”

For some reason, my arms, which I was pretty sure Gall Falion had sliced off, were stuck to my shoulders. *I don’t have a self-healing function as far as I know...* I thought, staring at my hands.

“Whoa! What the hell...” My hands were black, a lustrous jet black, like obsidian. They moved without any issue, and it felt like all the nerve endings were intact. I ran my eyes along them. The black limbs were affixed to my shoulders like plants rooted in soil. It was a bit icky.

Also, someone had taken me out of the Magic Armor Updated Version Two. The leg sections were gone too. I was down to my undies. My body was wrapped in bandages with blood seeping out the sides. I’d been given first aid. That meant whoever saved me couldn’t use healing magic. I also had this person to thank for the arms...maybe?

“...Ah.” I looked around and saw my clothes in a folded pile. On top of them, if you’ll believe it, someone had tossed a severed arm. Freshly decap—or de-arm-itated, even.

Oh. I guess that was my arm. I could see the Dragon God’s bracelet on it.

“Ow...” When I dragged myself over to my arm, my body was rocked by a wave of pain. I said a quick healing spell to close my wounds, then took the bracelet from my severed arm and put it around my new black arm. It...was working, right?

“Where am I?” I said out loud, tentatively standing up and producing a flame in my palm to illuminate my surroundings. I was in a space about five by four meters. The walls were earth. Going from the presence of a ceiling, I was in a cave, just like I’d thought. Some sort of fabric was spread out at the back of the cave, and I’d been laid down on top of it. That fabric... Was it a cloak?

First, I headed for the cave entrance to ascertain my location. The cave curved, but I quickly saw light. That was the exit. Someone was standing there. Someone with massively broad shoulders and armor to match. As I drew near, he turned around slowly and raised the visor of his helm. A familiar face appeared in the opening.

“Dohga...” I said.

“Uh-huh.”

“You saved me?”

“I saw the bridge fall. Jumped in, right away. You were unconscious. Tried to carry you, but the armor was heavy. I took it off. Brought you here. Bound your wounds.”

Dohga had saved me. He’d jumped down to the bottom of this ravine...

Oof. I’m sorry, Dohga, for saying that you didn’t have any presence and you were useless...

“Well, thank you. You saved my life. I’m sorry for going off alone. I should have been more careful.”

“...Mm. Sandor’s orders,” Dohga said with a weak smile. Even if he was just doing what he was told this whole time, Dohga had been looking out for me. What a good guy. I was the moron here, thinking I’d been looking out for those two soldiers.

“Were these arms you too?” I asked, holding up my onyx-black arms. Dohga shook his head.

“When I found you, you were like...a cocoon. I opened it. The cocoon turned into arms.”

Huh? I was a cocoon, and then the cocoon turned into arms? If the arms were the cocoon, what the hell was the cocoon? Was I carrying

something that'd make arms attach to me? I looked at my arms. Dohga looked apologetic.

“I found one real arm. I looked. But no other arm. Might have gotten eaten. I’m sorry.”

“Oh no. Don’t sweat it.” I could grow it back with healing magic...if the black ones came off, that is. “Where are we?” I asked.

“Bottom of the ravine. The most deepest bit.”

“Right... How much time has passed?”

“Dunno. No sun here. Two or three days, I think.” Dohga moved to one side and light hit my eyes. It was faint and dim, bluish in hue. What looked like glowing moss and mushrooms were growing thickly outside the cave, illuminating the surrounding area. That wasn’t all I saw, though. Outside the cave, blocking the entrance, were three corpses. They were animals with carapaces like dinosaurs. Earth Dragons. Three whole Earth Dragons lay there, dead.

“...Did you do this?” I asked.

“Uh-huh. To protect Rudeus.” I noticed there was scarlet blood smeared on Dohga’s greataxe. Earth Dragon blood, I guess.

Had he seriously taken them down alone? Way to go, Dohga! I might have underestimated him a tiny bit. The North God Kalman had said as much, actually.

“You’re a North Emperor, is that right?”

“Uh-huh. Still learning. Master says I kill monsters good.”

All right, what dumbass said Dohga was useless? Ariel sent a fighter who knows his business! Fine, it was me, I’m sorry. I underestimated him!

“Right...” I said. “You’re really something.”

“Uh-huh.” He smiled happily at my praise.

If Dohga’s a North Emperor...

“What about Sandor?” I asked.

There was a long pause, and then he said, “...I can’t say.”

“Right.”

Never mind. I had a hunch. I'd grill him when I got back.

"All right. We should get out of here." Before anything else, we had to get back.

The former Sword God... No, Gall Falion might not be Sword God anymore, but his abilities were intact. I'd keep calling him Sword God. I mean, there were second and third North Gods, and besides, it wasn't like someone would arrest me for thinking of him as a Sword God. So...the Sword God and the North God. My enemies were powerful, and they were in disguise. It was possible no one knew they'd tried to take me out yet. If they *really* wanted to hurt me, then a hunting party would be coming to destroy the Superd Village. We could handle the hunting party, even if they came in hundreds, but it was a different story if those two hid inside the crowd.

I had to stop them.

"...First, take me to where I fell. I want to get my armor. There might still be some usable scrolls, too."

"Uh-huh," Dohga agreed. He set off walking, and I followed his sturdy and reliable figure.

We reached the Magic Armor relatively quickly, killing two Earth Dragons along the way. Dohga took them both down in one hit.

Yeah, *one. Hit.*

He stood his ground as the Earth Dragon rushed him, then with one swing of his massive axe, its head went flying off. Now *that* was a guy you could count on.

Thinking back to the fight with the Invisible Wolves, he seemed to be weak to sneak attacks, but he couldn't be bested in a battle of sheer strength.

While Dohga was in great shape...

“Hmm...” The Magic Armor was deeply cut up. The Scroll Vernier on the back was ruined, the bundle of scrolls cut clean in two. Not only that, but my blood must have splattered inside the vernier—it was all clogged up. It was useless like this. I guess even the Magic Armor couldn’t protect you when up against Sword God-level enemies. The sword must have been fragile. It had punctured through the armor, then snapped in half. From the blade fragment, it didn’t look like anything special.

Gall Falion was supposed to have lots of magic swords, but he must have left them behind so he’d blend in. If he’d brought a thing like that, Orsted or Cliff would have picked up on it. If he’d had his own sword, the armor wouldn’t have stopped it. I’d have been cut in half. That wasn’t a pleasant thought...

“This is useless now,” I said. It looked like I had no choice but to throw away the Scroll Vernier Roxy had made for me. After she’d worked so hard on it... *I’ll come back and get it later.*

The armor itself would still move, though. It wasn’t in perfect shape, but it still had one of the arm parts, and the leg parts were undamaged. Even so, not being able to use the summoning scrolls was a blow. I’d be no match for those two without the Magic Armor Version One. When we got back to the Superd Village, I’d have to pop back to the office straight away and bring back the spare. Well, I would if I had that sort of time.

“...Huh?” When I detached the scroll vernier from the Magic Armor, the sword tip impaling it fell to the ground, and with it, a scroll.

Except it wasn’t a scroll. It was a box. There’d happened to be space inside the vernier, so I’d stored that box in it. It was about the size of a dictionary and engraved with devilish patterns. The kind of box that curses you when you open it.

“The box I got from Atofe...” This was the box I’d been told to open if I found myself in a desperate situation. It was when the sword hit this box that it had snapped. I could see the weak indent the blade had left in it. Hesitantly, I opened the box and looked inside. There was nothing there. It was empty.

Wait. There was something written on the inside of the lid.

This black flesh is an offshoot of Immortal Demon King Atofe. When in peril, release it and it shall protect you. Wield with care.

Black flesh... I thought, looking at my arm. *...Is that what this arm is?* I was pretty sure I hadn't opened it, but maybe Gall Falion's attack had put a crack in it, and it had sensed that I was in danger, protected me from the fall, then parasitized my arm and staunched the bleeding...something like that?

Yeah, that had to be it. Facing east, I kowtowed. I thanked the violent demon king from the bottom of my heart.

“Lady Atofe...” I said aloud, “thank you!” No one replied.

Atofe would still be on her way, but if we saw each other, I'd give her a nice bottle of something. What was that wine with the dumb name?

“Right, let's get back,” I said. The fight was approaching. I had to get home fast.

Or at least, that was my big plan. It turned out we couldn't climb the cliff face. I used earth magic to climb a bit of the way, but we left the area with the luminous mushrooms and moss and everything went totally dark. While we were engulfed in that darkness, what should attack us but a swarm of Earth Dragons? The footholds I'd made with earth magic were unstable, and then in the darkness, more than ten Earth Dragons jumped on us like geckos. One after another, they came at us from either side. They were so massive that we had no choice but to retreat. As if that wasn't bad enough, they used magic. Why wouldn't they? Come on! Earth Lances stabbed out from above, below, left, right, and even from the wall itself. Absolute nightmare.

Ugh. Dragons!

“Phew...”

I tried all sorts of things. I tried to use a catapult to launch us to the top in one go. I tried using earth magic to hide us while we climbed. Whatever I did, the Earth Dragons messed it up. They intercepted us mid-

flight in our catapult launch and found us through my stealth magic. They were unexpectedly clever and relentless. Once they locked on, they chased us until we retreated to the spot where the mushrooms and moss grew. They didn't seem to like places like that. Maybe it was the mushrooms, or maybe they didn't see this area as their territory. A few did still pursue us down there, so it wasn't like they were physically incapable.

"What to do..." I wondered. "You know, Dohga, I'm impressed you made it down here."

"...Uh-huh. Not many attacked on the way down."

"Huh... Ah, hang on. That makes sense."

Earth Dragons' senses were dull to anything above them but alert to anything below. I knew that, but this was the first time I'd seen it in action. It was relentless, like how a rooster goes on the attack when it spies an enemy. I considered resorting to area-of-effect magic to blast them all away, but all that would do was get us buried in the rubble. The ravine was wide and deep, and the Earth Dragons could use earth magic. Even if I took out dozens, it wouldn't make a dent in their numbers. I didn't want to use a huge amount of magic unnecessarily when the fight with Kalman and Gall Falion was still to come.

Ugh, I was dithering. Meanwhile, their assassins' blades might be bearing down on the Superd Village. They could easily turn those blades in other directions too. Zanoba's location would be exposed at minimum. They might have already got to him. I was itching to get going...but I had to slow down. Rushing wouldn't make anything better.

For some reason, when I looked with the Eye of Distant Sight, the Earth Dragons were *still* watching us after we'd climbed back down.

"Let's see if there's somewhere with fewer Earth Dragons, yeah?" I suggested.

"...Uh-huh."

With that, we started walking, our path illuminated by the mushrooms and moss. It wasn't only Earth Dragons that attacked us. We had to contend with bugs as big as people that looked like praying mantises and centipedes. Perhaps the Earth Dragons survived by eating the bugs. An Earth Dragon had grabbed a bug in its jaws right in front of us before

clambering off up the cliff. The body of another Earth Dragon came tumbling down—I suppose it died up on the cliff wall?—and got swarmed by bugs. Their prey was down here, and it was rare that anything came from above. It made sense that the Earth Dragons only paid attention to things below them. There was an odd food chain specific to this ravine.

Something occurred to me as we walked.

“This path is easy to walk on, huh?” I said. The path along the bottom of the ravine was unexpectedly smooth. Some areas were blocked off by huge mushrooms or rocks that must have fallen from above, but it was very flat and easy to navigate. I felt like I’d walked a similar path before.

“...Uh-huh. Red Wyrm Jaw’s the same.”

“Ohh!”

That place! The site of Orsted’s heartwarming, awful memories!

It *did* feel the same as Red Wyrm’s Upper and Lower Jaws, as well as the road to the Sword Sanctum. The mushrooms and fallen rocks made it hard to tell, but those places *had* felt like this.

“Does that mean someone made this...?”

There weren’t any monsters on that road. That meant someone had made this path, then called the Earth Dragons... Just a second. Hadn’t it been Laplace who’d called dragons to the central continent? Laplace could have made this path, too.

Why?

I had no way of knowing. I was looking for a place to climb up, not for the answer to a historical mystery. There might be a spot with rocky terrain that prevented the Earth Dragons from nesting there. I’d been looking up with the Eye of Distant Sight for a little while now, but the walls of the ravine were so full of holes, I worried about their structural integrity. It was like a city of skyscrapers crammed together without gaps. There wasn’t an Earth Dragon living in every hole, but it was damn close to it. A thousand, maybe two. It was the ones living at the bottom that mostly came down to look for food. I didn’t think there was enough food down here to support such a large number of Earth Dragons, but in this world, it wasn’t

unusual to see monsters in numbers that didn't line up with the amount of prey on offer.

...What if I can use that info to climb to the top of the ravine? But how, exactly? Come on, brain!

It was such a pain getting out after falling in. I *had* been told not to fall into the Ravine of the Earthwurm. But did I listen? Noooo...

“Rudeus.”

“Hm? Enemies?” I readied myself for another bug or something to pop up, but Dohga was pointing straight off to one side. There was nothing but a wall there. Wait—not nothing. It was in the shadow of a mushroom, which made it hard to see, but there was a hole. There were holes here and there around the bottom of the ravine, but this hole was a bit different from the others because of the stairs. It had a staircase!

It led downward.

We're supposed to go down from here?

Then—

“Uh?” The next second, my arm moved of its own accord. My right hand pointed at the hole. Like it was telling me to go in.

“Lady Atofe, is this the exit...?”

Atofe's offshoot didn't speak, but the arm went on pointing.

“I guess it is.” It didn't look like we were going to find a place we could climb up no matter how far we walked. The ravine didn't go on forever, but even if we pressed on for *ages*, we'd probably just hit a dead end. Turning back to search the other direction would take time too. I might as well investigate everything that caught my notice on the way.

“Shall we see what's down there?”

“Mm-hmm.” Dohga agreed without hesitation. Maybe he sensed something when he looked at the staircase too. So we set off, down into the dark.

At the bottom of the stairs was a massive altar. Massive altar... How else can I describe it?

It was in a vast space smothered with mushrooms and moss supported by two pillars decorated with engravings. There was a dais of quarried stone, and the wall behind it was adorned with a finely engraved fresco. The thing it depicted might have been a dragon. There were a whole lot of different things crammed into the design, but it was hard to tell in the gloom. Still, I had the feeling I'd seen something like it before. Now, where was that—*oh*.

“Is this a ruin left behind by the Dragon Clan...?” I asked out loud.

Yeah, that was it. This place looked a lot like the teleportation ruins. What's more, these carvings looked like things I'd seen at the floating fortress. That meant there might be teleportation ruins here. Even if there were, could I count on them? Where was I going to go, hopping on a teleportation circle that led to who knew where? I just wanted to go straight up.

Hold on, don't jump to conclusions yet. As far as I could see, there were no rooms other than this one with the altar. The Atofe Hand wasn't pointing that way—it was pointing toward the fresco, and a small stone shelf below it. Scratch that, the shelf only looked small because the fresco was so big. It wasn't small at all. Atofe's hand was pointing that way.

Atofe's face appeared in my mind's eye. Could I really follow the lead of a demon king with that awful face? Uncertainty grabbed at me for a second, but my legs were already moving. With the Atofe Hand still pointing, I went over to the shelf. On it, there were several bottles, cloudy and with open lids. There was also a cloudy crystal ball set into the shelf.

“There'd better not be booze in these,” I muttered, picking up a bottle. It was engraved with a dragon pattern. I bet if I showed it to Zanoba, he'd be able to tell me how much it was worth. Oh, and it was empty.

“Okay... What do I do with this?” I asked the Atofe Hand. It didn't reply. Instead, it reached out. It went straight past the bottles for the cloudy crystal. It rested on top of the crystal ball, and with that, control returned to me.

What's this about? I wondered. What was it telling me to do? I had bottles and a crystal and an altar. It was like an adventure-game puzzle. *In which case, I'd like a hint.*



“Rudeus. There.”

Dohga, now standing behind me, was pointing at something above my head. I looked up and saw a blue glow coming from the top of the great pillars holding up the altar.

No, that wasn’t right. The pillars weren’t glowing—something that glowed blue was seeping down from above them. This crystal sphere—or the whole altar, I guess—was a magical implement. A magical implement that leaked blue water. Only, looking at the light, I couldn’t help but be reminded of the moss and mushrooms around us.

“Okay, so what’s the deal with the water?” I wondered if I was supposed to drink it, though the color didn’t look healthy... Except there were bottles here, so maybe I had to *use* the water somewhere. Maybe I filled the bottles with the water, then poured them out into some contraption, then the contraption would move, and a door would open, and I’d get a legendary sword. Too bad I didn’t need one of those right now.

“This, maybe?” Dohga was pointing at the fresco. There was a huge image there depicting people and Earth Dragons. Maybe it was set up so that the blue water flowed out when you moved the crystal sphere and activated the magical implement—the blue light threw the whole picture into relief, showing the river of blue water. At the top was the altar and a person was collecting the blue water that came from it in a bottle. Then, the person with the bottle poured it on the people around them, and they all picked up swords and spears and went after the Earth Dragons. They were *hunting* them.

Well, based on a quick look at the fresco, this water had to help with hunting Earth Dragons. There were letters written in the corner of the picture too, but I couldn’t read them. They looked a little different from the dragon writing I’d seen.

“Oh, hold on...” Something had occurred to me. The Earth Dragons didn’t come down to the floor of the Ravine. We had blue moss, blue mushrooms, and now blue water. Maybe people had lived here once, and those people had used the blue water to drive off the Earth Dragons, who didn’t like some substance in the water. That same substance was in the blue moss and mushrooms. Plus, looking at the fresco, the people attacked the Earth Dragons from behind and went in on an angle from beneath them.

From beneath, even though the Earth Dragons were primed to notice that... Was it possible the dragons couldn't see them? They couldn't see the things that gave off this blue light? That would explain why they rarely came down to the ravine floor. So, maybe, if we poured this over our bodies, they wouldn't see us?

I turned back to Dohga and asked, "...Want to try it?" I didn't explain what I meant.

But Dohga grunted, "Uh-huh," like it was obvious.

Not long after, we stood at the top of the ravine. We'd escaped. We'd escaped the Ravine of the Earthwurm.

"Ahh, it feels good to be a free man."

We'd left the cave covered from head to toe in the blue water. Then, I made an elevator with earth magic and lifted us up slowly. I kept it slow because I was worried the Earth Dragons might notice us if I went too fast.

I was right. The Earth Dragons looked at us, but they didn't react. Either they couldn't see us, or we didn't register as food. They just stayed stuck to the cliff walls, pushing up against one another and not moving. It was barely an hour after that when, after slowly elevating us, I saw the dark sky. It was nighttime.

We stepped off at the edge of the ravine. For some reason, the moonlight was making me emotional.

"We did it," I said, slapping Dohga on the back.

"Uh-huh!" He nodded happily.

It had taken a little while, but we'd escaped. Now we had to get back to the Superd Village right away and tell them about the two soldiers.

Chapter 3: A Shot at Victory

A HEATED DEBATE was underway when I got back.

“Our foe is at our gates. We must get ready.”

“So we should go and search for Rudeus first!”

The second person yelling was Eris, and she was arguing with Sandor. Roxy was there too.

“Dohga is with him. They’ll make it back eventually. In the meantime, we need to organize our forces, and set our trap...”

“Like that blockhead will be any help!”

“He’s more capable than you think.”

“Well, if we’re talking about capable, how come you weren’t with him?!”

“Hmph... Well that’s...”

Next, the big question: would they come to my rescue, or assume I’d make it back on my own and engage the enemy?

Eris was arguing in favor of rescuing me. I appreciated that.

“Whatever, I’ll go down myself!” Without standing on ceremony, Eris rose and spun on her heel. That was when our eyes met.

“If you’re heading down, I’d recommend going down to the altar using the staircase in the shadow of the mushroom and getting the blue water,” I said.

“Rudeus!”

Eris responded to my helpful puzzle walkthrough by throwing her arms around me.

Ow, ow. You’re gonna snap my spine.

“I was worried about you!”

“I’m sorry.”

Roxy and the others all looked relieved I was alive. *Lucky, lucky me!*

“...By the way, what’s with the arm?”

“Oh, this... Look, I’ll explain everything at once. Only, before that...” I looked around until my gaze came to rest on one man sitting there.

“You. Who are you?” I demanded, staring down Sandor.

North God Kalman II, Alex Rybak. The protagonist of *The Epic of the North God*, who defeated the Monarch of the King Dragons, slew a giant behemoth, achieved numerous glorious feats on battlefields around the world, and eventually became one of the Seven Great Powers. He was the greatest practitioner of North God Style, and until a mere hundred years ago was regarded as the greatest swordsman in the world.

That was how Sandor introduced himself. To tell the truth, I wasn’t that surprised. Part of me wondered what a guy like that was doing here, but mostly, it made sense. It made sense why Orsted had put him with me but not told me why. Why Ariel had sent him over the heads of Ghislaine and Isolde. Why Dohga was a North Emperor. He was North God Kalman II. It made sense.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked him.

“Just in case... The Man-God can see into peoples’ hearts, but if no one on our side knew I was Kalman, I could conceal my presence. It made it easier to move too.”

Fair enough. Pretty sure everything I know got leaked to the Man-God when I fell into the ravine, though.

He wouldn’t know Kalman was on my team because I didn’t know it either...but then, if he could see into Sandor’s heart or Dohga’s, did that even matter?

“...Really?” I asked.

“Well, to be honest, I kind of thought it’d be cool if I revealed my true identity at a crucial moment.”

“Oh, granted. Of course.”

People trip over themselves to look cool, yeah. Happens all the time.

“Wasn’t it futile after it came out that Dohga was a North Emperor?”

“I suppose… Though Dohga isn’t an especially well-known North Emperor.”

If I’d known the two of them were powerful warriors, I’d have tried to conceal them. Except if I’d done that, maybe everything would have gone even worse.

“Well, anyway. I’ll be counting on you from here on out, Alex.”

“Naturally. Only please keep calling me Sandor. That’s the name I go by these days.”

After confirming Sandor’s identity, we moved on to putting together all our information.

Ten days earlier, I’d brought the Sword God Gall Falion and North God Kalman III to the village, and they shoved me into the ravine. I hadn’t felt the time pass on the ravine floor, but I’d been unconscious for a long time. It was a day later, maybe two—I wasn’t sure of the precise time—when the teleportation circles and communication tablets had stopped glowing. That was what had clued Eris and Roxy into the fact that something was terribly wrong, and they’d come to the Superd Village to meet up with me. They’d guessed that the magic circles at the Superd Village would have ceased to glow too, but they trusted that I was still active. They decided to see how things played out.

It was Sandor, who’d come straight back, who told them I was missing. He organized a search party with Ruijerd and the others to find me, which was when they’d discovered that Dohga had gone into the ravine after me. Sandor decided then to leave me to Dohga and stay on the alert for the enemy’s attack. Reason being the information he’d gotten from his informant had gotten him anxious. The informant told him a totally baseless rumor that the devils in the forest were the Superd, and they’d murdered

everyone in the surrounding area. Based on the rumors, the kingdom was mustering a hunting party.

“I see... Right...”

Backing up Sandor’s information was the report from Eris and Roxy. They had only arrived yesterday. That distance should have been only a four-day journey, but it took ten days. They’d been held up by a huge ceremony in the capital they had to push their way through. It was the departure ceremony for the hunting party. The decision to hunt the Superd had broken out into a kind of festival, and I guess they decided to hold the departure ceremony a little early, in the midst of the festivities.

Strictly speaking, it shouldn’t have been held until a little later. Geese probably got the news that I’d been tossed into the ravine and set things in motion ahead of schedule. When Orsted’s bracelet came off, that had alerted the Man-God to my survival, so maybe he’d wanted a speedy attack on Orsted before I got out of the ravine. Roxy and Eris had done some recon work around the too-early departure of the hunting party, and confirmed that the Sword God and the North God had joined during that.

As they did their recon, however, the two of them couldn’t shake some questions: I was supposed to have negotiated with the kingdom, so how had things ended up like this? Where had I disappeared to?

Then, before they knew what was happening, the hunting party had set off from the capital. They followed anyway, keeping a close watch. They knew where the party was headed, but they thought maybe they could learn something. When they reached the Second City, Roxy suggested that further pursuit was too dangerous. They gave the town a wide berth then traveled through the forest, heading for the Superd Village. After that, they got lost—understandable—and wasted a few days. They arrived safely at the village in the end.

So here we were. Oh yeah, apparently Eris and Ruijerd had an emotional reunion when she arrived back at the Superd Village. The moment Eris laid eyes on him, she’d been struck by the urge to pounce. I suppose she was consumed by the desire for him to see how strong she’d gotten. She managed to hold herself back. She wasn’t a child anymore. Ever since Ruijerd had recognized her as a warrior, Eris Greyrat had been a

warrior. So as not to embarrass herself, she had to behave in front of her mentor. Telling herself this, she assumed her usual pose and said, “It’s been a while! You look the same as ever, Ruijerd.”

“Hey, Eris,” he replied. “You’ve grown.”

“Yeah, duh.”

That was the extent of Eris and Ruijerd’s conversation. It was enough to fill Eris with nostalgia and pride. Once, she’d had to look up at Ruijerd, but now, they stood eye to eye. In battle, she could fight alongside him. Eris told me all this with a smug look on her face.

“We don’t have much time left. The hunting party is probably heading this way as we speak, and I expect it won’t be long until the Ogre warriors join them.”

“Okay. Right, here’s my report.”

I told them how the two soldiers had been the Sword God and the North God, using the same rings that I had to disguise themselves. Geese was probably disguising himself in the same way and that was why we couldn’t find him. I also told them that I’d fallen into the ravine, but the Atofe Hand and Dohga had gotten to me in the nick of time and saved me. I told them that when I fell, Orsted’s bracelet had come off...and *the Man-God had seen me*. I finished with our escape from the ravine and ensuing return to the village.

“Rudeus,” Eris said when I was done, her voice low, “I’ll kill Gall Falion.” She was staring at the point where my arm met my body.

“...Well, that is one option, but let’s discuss it. I’m happy you want to avenge me, but I don’t want you charging off alone, or you’ll end up like I did.”

Okay, let’s recap.

First, Geese was definitely in a position where he could manipulate the hunting party. The most likely scenario was that he’d disguised himself as the king. I didn’t know who the disciples were, but Geese had the Sword God, the North God, and the Ogre God on his side. The Sword God and the North God had scouted out the Superd Village using the power of the rings, and the Ogre God had gone with Geese to mount an assault on the office,

robbing us of any place to run. Now, they were with the other hundred or so members of the hunting party, heading for the Superd Village.

Ogre God Marta had been sent to Sharia. Thinking about it again made my heart sink into despair.

“What happened to our house...?” I asked. Roxy looked down and Eris folded her arms.

Sandor stroked his chin, looking troubled. “The Ogre God may have just destroyed the office and then left. He might have gone on to attack Sharia too, but we have no way to know.”

I thought this through. What would I have done? Right now, no one was in Sharia. No Rudeus, no Orsted. There wasn’t a single person there who could stand up to the Ogre God. No way would he have just left it. Even if I didn’t have the firepower, I’d probably attack anyway, just for the hell of it.

The room was silent. I got the feeling Orsted was glowering too. I couldn’t know for sure because of the helmet, but he always glowered.

“Dear me! I’m missing the gathering!” There was a voice from the entrance. I looked around, and there he was.

“Zanoba!”

Right, he’s here too. No—I didn’t forget about him! Of course I didn’t! I just, um, I had my family to worry about!

“Sorry I’m late, Master. We just arrived.”

“No, it’s all good. I only just got here.”

I saw Julie and Ginger behind Zanoba. They were beat up. There were scrapes all over them and exhaustion had put dark shadows under their eyes. It looked like their magic was nearly exhausted.

“We had some trouble with invisible beasts along the way, you see. If the Superd had not come to our aid, we would have been in grave peril.”



“You don’t say. Okay, let’s have those two lie down… Wait, no, you should tell us what you know first. You can sit in the corner and rest,” I said. Without a word, Ginger and Julie tottered off into the hall and sank down next to a pillar. Roxy ran over immediately to cast healing magic on them.

“Okay, Zanoba. How much do you know about what’s happening?”

“The gist of it. I’d be grateful if you could explain it to me from the beginning.”

So with that, I explained. It was honestly annoying going through the same stuff again, but it had to be done. The important thing was for all of us to be on the same page.

“—and so, our concerns now are the hunting party coming this way, and what happened in Sharia.”

When I finished, Zanoba gave a snort of laughter. I didn’t recall saying anything funny. Surely, he wasn’t thinking something like “Well, *my* whole family is safe here! Hahaha!” He wasn’t like that.

“How interesting. On the way here, I found a monument to the Seven Great Powers, so I had Perugius’s servant Master Arumanfi confirm some things.”

“Ohh!” Standing up with a joyful smile was not me but Sandor. He looked around the hall, then sat straight back down again.

“Excuse me. And?”

“He said your family is safe, Master.”

Relief settled over the room.

Okay. They were safe. Leo must have done his job, or someone else had protected them. Maybe they saw a potential invasion of Sharia on the horizon; it did house the University of Magic, after all. Whichever it was, it was happy news.

“If Master Perugius joins our forces, that alone would tip the balance in our favor.” Sandor looked around the hall with mild excitement.

Zanoba, on the other hand, looked mildly troubled. “No, Sir Perugius apparently said that he would remain a spectator in this battle. I doubt we

can rely on his aid.”

“Surely not! This is the sort of situation where he is strongest!” Sandor exclaimed, recoiling in a way I thought was a bit melodramatic.

Did the guy like Perugius that much? No, he was the Second North God. The First North God and Perugius were old allies, back when they’d been the Three Godslayers, which meant Sandor might be acquainted with Perugius. He might even have looked up to him, a man of his father’s generation known as a hero. Setting that aside, Sandor was right. The power of Perugius and his twelve familiars would be especially valuable in a delicate situation like this. There was no better reconnaissance agent than Arumanfi the Bright, and Clearnight of the Roaring Thunder had the ability to share information. Putting just those two together would throw our opponent’s hand open and get all our allies up to speed in an instant.

In the legends about Perugius, that was how he’d stripped enemy armies of everything. And that was just the beginning. Between all his familiars, they had powers that could cover every eventuality. If he said he wouldn’t help us, though, then that was that. Orsted’s policy was to not take help from Perugius, anyway.

Suddenly, Orsted spoke. “Ogre God Marta might be rough, but he is decent. He wouldn’t attack non-combatants. If it had been Gall Falion or North God Kalman III, *they* would have attacked Sharia.” His voice was soft, but it carried well. There was a bit of an echo, maybe because of the helmet. “Geese, however, is a coward. Through those other two, he confirmed that I was here. Because there was a teleportation circle, he couldn’t rule out the possibility that I might return to the office. Thus, he sent Ogre God Marta. Even for me, it would take some time to defeat the Ogre God. In the meantime, Geese—or some ally of his—went around breaking the magic circles. He may have planned this from the start.”

So that was Orsted’s theory. Geese only brought the Ogre God along as a safety net. That safety net had protected my family. Then...he might not have meant to attack Sharia in the first place. I came first. My family came later.

Sandor chimed in with a question. “Then why didn’t all three of them go?”

“I believe that is because the goals of Gall Falion and North God Kalman III differ from Geese’s.”

The goals of the Sword God and the North God? At this, everyone looked confused. Well, everyone except Eris.

“...Because Gall Falion wants to fight you, right?” she said.

“As does Alexander Rybak.”

Orsted was in the Superd Village. The Sword God and the North God knew that, which was why they’d stayed behind rather than go to Sharia. From that, I got the sense that Geese didn’t entirely have those two under his control. They could have climbed down to the floor of the ravine and killed me if that was what they were after. I mean, even North Emperor Dohga had done it. The North God and Alexander could have. They weren’t doing what Geese and the Man-God wanted from them.

“Well, I know my family is safe, so that’s a relief at least. Though I can’t really be relieved when the Sword God, the North God, and the Ogre God are about to attack us.”

Three God-tier warriors, plus another hundred in the hunting party. On the Superd side, there were fewer than twenty warriors who could fight, plus the folk here. Orsted, Zanoba, Ginger, Julie, Norn, Cliff, Elinalise, Ruijerd, Roxy, Eris, Sandor, and Dohga. The Superd women and children, along with the medical team, were staying in the village. The medical team was one thing, but the hunting party had its sights on the Superd. If they breached the village, all of them could end up dead.

Ginger, Julie, and Norn weren’t fighters. Cliff...wouldn’t be much help in a fight either. As for Orsted, he wouldn’t fight either. He was practically incapable of recovering mana, and his max amount went down as he used it. I’d become his follower to compensate for that. I couldn’t ask him to take over just because there was going to be a fight. Tossing him onto the battlefield as a last resort meant putting him up against not one, not two, but *three* God-tier warriors together. He’d have to burn through a ton of mana.

Even if we avoided that, there was still the fact that we didn’t know what Geese looked like. Maybe he still had some backup forces. If I were Geese, I wouldn’t send in any old moron I thought would get brushed off in

a head-on fight. I'd give them a surefire plan. Orsted was the queen at the back of the board. Sure, I'd win that exchange if I brought him out, but he'd be taken in the next move. Unless there was nothing else for it, it was better for him to stay back.

Three God-tier warriors. Without Orsted, it wasn't going to be an easy fight. It would be tough...but not so tough that we *couldn't* win. We had three strong fighters—Sword King Eris, North God Sandor, and North Emperor Dohga. If I worked with Zanoba and Ruijerd to support them...it wouldn't be easy, but whether we fought or fled, it wouldn't be totally impossible.

This all-out battle felt a bit poorly planned for Geese. My allies were all gathered in the Superd Village right now. It would be one thing if he thought I wasn't here, but when I fell into the ravine, it was revealed to the Man-God that I was alive. I was here, and so was Orsted. Was he really going to try for an all-out battle here and now?

Ah, right. He'd had Abyssal King Vita. All going according to plan, Geese had meant to use Abyssal King Vita to turn Ruijerd against me. Going off that, he would have tricked me as I arrived unsuspecting in the Biheiril Kingdom, then when the disguised Sword God and North God arrived at the Superd Village with the Ogre God. There would be three God-tiers plus Abyssal King Vita and Ruijerd—a guaranteed knockout.

That'd be what he was counting on. Yeah. Going off that, maybe it was fair to say that he now looked like he was down on pieces because I'd outmaneuvered him. Though you could also parse it as sheer luck on my part—I still didn't know who was a disciple and who wasn't. The info we had conveyed the same sense that Geese didn't have Gall Falion and North God Kalman III totally under control. How had Geese gotten them to work for him? If he offered them some conditions that they'd accepted, that would be why they were so desperate to attack. Conditions had come up in our conversation just now. The guys who'd attacked me wanted to fight Orsted. After seeing him, they were ready to fight. Geese had set up that encounter for them. That was it. Continuing that idea, Geese had supposedly sprang into action as soon as he knew I'd fallen into the ravine. He even sped up the departure of the hunting party, the one meant to have set off at the same time as the Ogre warriors. He'd have known that I'd struggle to get out of the ravine and tried to finish things while I was out of the picture.

Geese, knowing that I wasn't dead, hadn't waited to send off the hunting party to strike a crushing blow at Orsted. He'd been busy while I was out of commission, but so had I. I got back before the battle began, and things had settled into place.

It was possible that he'd realized Sandor's identity. Also, going off how harried the Man-God had seemed...

"...This might be our shot at victory," I said under my breath. Just then, a youth came into the hall. He was carrying a white spear—a Superd warrior.

"The hunting party has come. They are half a day away."

I'd made it back in time, but only just.

The Ravine of the Earthwyrm. It was, on average, four hundred meters across. At its widest, it extended to over five hundred meters, but at its narrowest, it was only around a hundred meters. The Superd had suspended a bridge over the narrowest point and used it to come and go from the forest. They crushed up and smeared herbs that repulsed the Invisible Wolves all over it.

Our enemies were many, but this was their only way through. Unlike a river, the ravine couldn't easily be crossed. They would have to stop there. If we took down the bridge, it would buy us more time. Also, unlike in the forest, there were no obstructions there to stop me using the Eye of Distant Sight. That put them within my firing range.

"Let's leave the bridge."

So the bridge stayed. We could bring it down if the hunting party came across it. Once you fell in, it was no picnic getting back up again—I knew from experience—and there were other benefits besides. There wasn't time to set a trap, but we decided to wait for the enemy here. Right now, we were fielding six players: me, Eris, Ruijerd, Zanoba, Sandor, and Dohga. The six of us would take on the three God-tiers. The Superd warriors would focus mainly on the hunting party. I had something else for Roxy to do, so

she'd be stationed at the back. Elinalise and a few of the Superd warriors would be her guard. Cliff and the others would protect the village.

It was a pretty traditional battle arrangement, I guess. Warriors on the front line, magicians in the back. We could also send anyone who got injured back to the village to be healed. Speaking of healing, I decided to leave the Atofe Hand where it was for the time being. Right now, our time—as well as the scrolls Roxy and Zanoba had on them—were limited. My new arm seemed to have better specs than my actual arm, so I figured I'd leave it on, then grow my real arms back when the battle was over with. I could use a healing magic scroll when the time came. It was a present from a demon king, so I was going to have some fun with it.

Half a day later, we were staring down the hundred-strong hunting party across the bridge. Three men stood at the front on the Biheiril Kingdom side. A middle-aged man with a sword at his belt. That was Sword God Gall Falion. He'd already relinquished his title as Sword God to another, and he was seriously getting on in years. His skill with a blade, though? *That* hadn't deteriorated. I was proof of that. I hesitated to attach "former" or "previous" to his name lest I let my guard down. Then there was a kid with a giant sword slung on his back—North God Kalman III, Alexander Rybak. He was one of the Seven Great Powers, but his strength was an unknown quantity. Then, standing nearly three meters tall, broad as the trunk of a giant tree and wearing a necklace with what looked like a bell on it and a tiger-striped loincloth, was a red ogre.

That was Ogre God Marta. Orsted's guess was that he hadn't attacked my family, but we didn't know for sure. Maybe I ought to thank him for that...but I didn't plan on it. He'd attacked the office. Which meant grim things for the elf girl on reception. Her name was Fa...Farraris...right? No, wait. Um. Well. It was something like that. Okay, so I hadn't ever actually remembered her name, but I still wanted to avenge her.

"No sign of Geese, huh?" Disappointingly, I didn't see a monkey face. Was he hiding nearby, or waiting back in the Second City of Ireli? He wasn't in range of the Eye of Distant Sight, at any rate. That was Geese for

you. If he didn't have things totally under control, he might have decided to throw it in this time and do a runner.

I saw scared faces amongst the hunting party as they looked at the Superd warriors with their green hair and white spears. Devils out of fairytales. If we won this battle, I was going to sell Ruijerd pamphlets on every street corner in the Biheiril Kingdom.

“There’s nothing to fear!” Unlike the hunting party, the three God-tiers at the front didn’t look scared of the Superd warriors. “We far outnumber them!” Alexander was particularly peppy. He waved his fist in the air, giving a rousing speech to raise morale in a voice loud enough to carry all the way over to us.

It was true, the hunting party beat us on numbers, but he was wrong. We were in the forest, and we had the Superd, so we had the advantage.

They all drew their swords while glaring at the twenty or so of us across the ravine with open hostility. Then, Alexander pulled the sword from his back.

“My name is Alexander Rybak, the Third North God Kalman! Follow me and together we shall have glory!”

With that, Alexander set off running across the suspension bridge, howling. Sandor cried, “Now!”

I fired stone cannons from both hands. They flew straight at the base of the suspension bridge, smashing it to pieces. Ruijerd, in front of me, also made his move. He sliced through the vines that supported the bridge with his white spear.

“Aaahh!”

Everyone watched in amazement as the bridge fell. North God Kalman III went plunging down into the abyss.

We all just stared in amazement, even Sandor, who’d given the order.

No way. That did not just happen. You’ve got to be kidding me...

I mean, he wasn’t coming back from a fall like that.

...Well, it was Alexander, so he might. Still, even if he survived, it was going to take him a while to climb up again.

“...O-okay, that’s one down?” I said. No one cheered. No one looked angry either. The shock of what had just happened was burned into everyone’s mind. This was our chance! I concentrated magic in my hands. The list of people who could attack right now was pretty damn short.

Let’s do it.

I raised my left hand to the sky. Sending up a massive surge of mana, I created thunder clouds, then used my right hand to subdue the raging magical energy, compress it, and bring it down.

“Lightning!” A crackle of impending thunder rolled in; a bolt of lightning flashed down. My vision went white, then there was a crash. Thunder boomed around us in a full swell. A cloud of dirt rose on the opposite cliff. Flames engulfed the trees, which clattered and cracked as they crashed to the ground. I couldn’t tell how much damage I’d done, but I felt it. I felt it so strongly my hands shook. It was the sense that I’d killed people. I pushed down my nausea, then I concentrated mana in my hands again.

“One more shot...” A second after I said it, something came hurtling out of the dust cloud. A red shape. The leap was effortless and at this distance, silent, like it was flying. Its momentum was overwhelming. The red shape closed in at startling speed and made impact. *Impact* was the only word for it. There was a bang and a cloud of smoke like a cannonball.

A red-skinned ogre, and a forty-something-year-old human: Ogre God Marta and the former Sword God Gall Falion. They had jumped across the ravine. A hundred-meter-long jump. Seven Great Powers on full display.

“Right... Who’s gonna fight me?” He was a grinning wolf. When I’d faced off against him last, he’d seemed a bit dopey. This was different. This was a battle with mortal stakes. At his belt, housed in its resplendent scabbard, was a sword. Probably magic. This wasn’t like the one the armor had stopped. I felt cold sweat trickling down my back.

“That’s me.” Stepping forward like it was a foregone conclusion came a red-haired mad dog. She had two swords at her hips. She folded her arms and placed herself imposingly in front of Gall Falion.

“Yeah, that figures. Who else?”

“Me,” I said.

Gall Falion scoffed. “Well, well! Looking good for a dead man.”

“Alive and kicking, actually.”

“Tch-hah. I told you we should’ve cut his head off,” he muttered.

Who was this bad temper directed at...? *Geese, I suppose.*

There was one more of us. He didn’t say his name, but beside me stood a brave, battle-hardened warrior with green hair and a white spear in his hand.

Three of us reunited. Eris, Ruijerd, and me. The three of us were going to fight together. Dead End was back.

It was three-on-one, but I didn’t see anyone complaining. The plan had been for me and Sandor to fight Alexander, but then the kid went and screwed himself over with that dumbass move. Sandor, Zanoba, and Dohga would take the Ogre God, who focused on hand-to-hand combat. Zanoba and Dohga were crazy strong against powerhouse-type characters.

Sandor, North God Kalman II, was also supposed to have experience fighting big enemies. They were the perfect combo. They could win. We might lose someone along the way, but even so. We could beat these two.

“Hyup!” In that moment, I heard a shout from behind us. I spun around just in time to see something fly up from the cliff—not something. It was a black-haired kid. The one who’d literally just now fallen into the ravine.

Breathing hard, he mopped his brow and lifted his sword high into the air. Then, like he was in a theater production, he proclaimed, “I am North God Kalman III! I will slay the cursed god of evil, Orsted, and become a hero! Anyone who would stand in my way may challenge me if they dare!”

No way...this isn’t happening. Did he run up? From the bottom of the ravine...?

To be fair, while it was a cliff, it wasn’t totally vertical. With magic, even I could stop myself on the way down and come straight back up. Or maybe he’d run up from the bottom stabbing that sword into the wall as he climbed... That was the Seven Great Powers for you.

“...Nothing for it, then,” Sandor said. “Master Rudeus, shall we take this bonehead?”

“Yeah.” I nodded at him.

I was disappointed I couldn’t fight with Eris and Ruijerd, but oh well. Back to the original plan.

“Watch out for that sword,” he said. “It’s the strongest in the world.”

There was only one sword fit for the North God to wield: the legendary greatblade, forged after the defeat of the Monarch of the King Dragons. Kajakut, the King Dragon Blade.

The blade’s master, however, was gaping at us, sword still raised. “... Why?” he demanded. “Why are you here?” The voice of North God Kalman III, Alexander Rybak, trembled as he looked at me.

Oh ho ho. Is it that surprising to see that I survived? Never mind that I was well enough to join the battle? I thought you’d have heard it from Geese, but I guess you didn’t believe it. See, when you don’t see a character die, like when they fall off a cliff, that always means they’re coming back.

Wait, what? Is he...not looking at me?

Alexander’s gaze was directed *behind* me. It was Sandor. He was looking at Sandor. Oh, okay. That made more sense.

“Dad!” Maybe that shout signaled the battle to begin, or maybe it was just a question of timing.

“Ruooaaaah!!!”

The next thing I knew, Ogre God Marta swung his arms up and brought them crashing into the ground, roaring a battle cry. The ground thrust up, the cliff crumbled, and a row of trees toppled. I let the impact carry me along, and thus the battle began.

Chapter 4: The Mad Dog King vs. the Former Sword God

BEFORE THEY KNEW IT, Eris and the others were far away from the ravine. This was because the moment after the Ogre God moved, Gall Falion started running away from the battlefield.

“You prefer this spot?”

They were inside the forest when Gall came to a halt, though it was a relatively open area. Barely a minute had passed, but Gall was fast; they’d run a significant distance from the ravine. Eris was a bit nervous about leaving Rudeus, but she focused her attention on the enemy in front of her.

“The Ogre God doesn’t distinguish between friend and foe when he goes on the rampage. Let’s stay out of his way,” Gall said. He squared off against Eris.

He didn’t draw his sword, as if to say he was happy to do this bare-handed. To Eris’s eyes, his stance looked wide open to attack. She raised her own weapon, the Phoenix Dragon Sword, above her head. Her opponent was still the former Sword God. She wasn’t quite sure if she should attack that opening.

“...You look well,” Gall said. Unexpected pleasantries. Then again, Gall was a person like she was. There was nothing weird about him saying words. On the other hand, given the situation, hearing this man reach for words instead of his sword was, to Eris at least, fairly strange.

She cocked her head, suspicious. Gall scoffed. “Remember Gino? Gino Britz?”

“...Yeah, I remember the guy. Nothing special.” At this, Gall laughed again.

“Yeah, him. He was strong for his age, but nothing special.” He looked up at the sky. The trees swayed in the wind, leaves rustling. There was no sign of birds or forest animals. In the distance, they could hear trees falling and something ripping. That was the sound of the Ogre God fighting. Possibly the North God. Hard to say.

Gall's words continued over the noise. "Now he's the Sword God."

"...I know."

"Do you, now... Didn't think your ears were that sharp. You go there to see him or something? Ah, well. Anyway, that's how it is. I surrendered the Sword God title to him."

Eris thought back on how she and Rudeus had gone to the Sword Sanctum to make this man, her enemy, into her ally. She hadn't met Gino Britz then. Even when Sword God Gall Falion told her now that he wasn't the Sword God, it didn't quite click for her. All she remembered was the sizable shock she'd had at finding the Sword Sanctum in such a drastically different state.

"What's that bastard's deal anyway? Going on about marrying Nina out of nowhere. So I told him, if he wants to marry Nina, he's gotta get stronger than me—and what d'you think the bastard did? He got stronger." Gall looked properly amused. His mouth curved as he reminisced.

"It was over in an instant. Even when I was young, I only swung a sword that heavy that fast once, maybe twice... No, maybe I was never that strong."

Gall waved his hand as though he'd remembered something. His hand chopped the air with such speed it seemed like it might produce a shockwave. He began to sweep it back, then stopped short.

"I don't strike twice, you hear? I don't get it."

Then, he folded his arms again. "I don't get it because ever since I was born, I was the strongest. I was born into this. I guess for normal folks, that moment comes where you must grow up..."

He looked up at the sky again. "Not the strongest any more though, are you?" he muttered under his breath, apparently to himself. After a brief pause, he continued: "Whatever. The brat got everything he wanted. The girl he was sweet on, the Sword God title... At the Sword Sanctum, he's got everyone's respect now. Won't be long before Gino's the name people think when they hear Sword God."

Here, Gall looked at Eris, finally observing her straight on.

"What are you, compared to that?" he asked.

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Dragon God Orsted was your enemy, but you snare yourself a man and now you’re wagging your tail for him?” Gall let out a short laugh, but he wasn’t smiling. There was rage in his face as he glared at Eris.

“I left my dream to you. My dream of crushing that titan, the Dragon God Orsted. Moronic, thinking about it now. Why the hell did I entrust that to *you*? You’ve had your fangs all pulled out. Berserker Sword King? *Hah*. There’s none of that in you now. Getting yourself a man’s all well and good, but wife number three? You settled for *that*? ”

He spat all of this out quickly, but none of it bothered Eris. *So what?* was all she could think to say. She didn’t know what he was on about. She didn’t remember him entrusting her with anything.

So, Eris said, “...You lost your nerve, huh?”

The Sword God’s pupils contracted. The murder in his eyes grew concentrated and shifted to his hands.

“I expel you from our tradition,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“I’ll never let you call yourself Sword King again.”

“Make me, if you think you’ve got it in you,” Eris retorted. She was ready to fight. If anything, she was confused about why they were still talking.

“You think you can beat me?”

“Obviously. You’re nothing. I’ll send your soul back to its maker with a single strike.”

“Hah... You know, that’s the second time anyone’s ever called me ‘nothing’.” Gall Falion readied himself, standing to conceal his blade. He widened his stance, lowered his weight, and put his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to draw. It was the stance for the unbeatable strike favored by Sword King Ghislaine Dedoldia.

Eris saw this and clenched her back teeth. The core of Sword God Style was striking with a heavy blade as fast as possible. Within that style, there were three stances. The first was a mid-range stance, the basic stance

of Sword God Style that could counter any technique. The second was a high stance, an aggressive stance suited to those who broke through an opponent's technique to push them back. The final was the draw stance, a defensive stance suited to those who read their opponent's technique and sniffed out the perfect moment to strike.

Essentially: those who read their opponent favored the draw stance, those who broke their opponent favored the high stance, and those who specialized in neither favored the mid-range stance. Eris, who had an innate sense of rhythm and actively sought to break her opponents, favored the high stance. Ghislaine, who with her beastfolk's smell and hearing excelled in reacting instinctively, favored the draw stance.

Gall Falion had assumed the draw stance. The former Sword God could fight from any of the stances, but here, he'd chosen the draw stance. He'd judged that he could read Eris. Even knowing that, Eris wasn't afraid. She kept her breathing shallow while slowly, slowly closing the distance between them.

In that moment, Gall felt something wrong. Eris was strangely silent.

As the name 'Mad Dog' suggested, when she'd been at the Sword Sanctum, she'd bared her teeth and attacked with an idiot's directness...but now, she held back.

There was one thing that hadn't changed—her expression. She was smiling. There was a smug, unpleasant grin plastered on her face, even as she stood with the serenity of a monk in training.

Looking at her face, Gall found himself wanting to close the distance and cleave her in half. He wasn't going to. He merely put his back to a great tree and waited, as still as if time had stopped.

Neither of them said a word. It was an unusual scene. If anyone who knew the two of them had seen it, they'd have found it utterly bizarre. Both Eris and Gall liked to attack first. Only the bold rose to the top of the Sword God ranks.

Yet they didn't move. The tree leaves that danced on the breeze like snow were the only indication time hadn't stopped. It was like a scene from a time almost forgotten. Take Gino Britz, who had just come up in the earlier conversation, for example. He had seen a fight using Sword God

Style once before, a few years ago, on the day that Eris became a Sword King. In the fight between Eris Greyrat and Nina Falion, neither girl had moved. Neither of them moved an inch. Someone unfamiliar with high-level Sword God Style warriors might have assumed this was how they fought.

Except they *were* moving. It was slow, only a fingertip at a time, but Eris was closing the distance between them. Now, they were just close enough for their sword tips to cross. Eris was within striking distance. They were still far apart—too far for one hoping to deal a decisive blow. They weren’t close enough yet for either to use their strongest attack.

In the fight between Eris and Nina, the one who’d moved first had lost. Nina had loosed a perfect Sword of Light, but Eris had outdone her with speed.

For Gall Falion, for the man who *had* once been the Sword God, outdoing Eris would be easy. He could cleverly get out of her range, time it so that the point of his blade reached its mark just before hers. He didn’t, though. Gall Falion stood unmoving. He didn’t close the distance between them, nor did he change his angle. He stayed still and observed Eris, only Eris, as though she were the only other thing in the world.

By inches, Eris got into range for a killing blow. She was in position to use her ultimate, most reliable strike.

Eris felt a tiny, tiny flicker of uncertainty. Gall Falion’s defense was perfect. If she used Sword of Light here and now, she thought she could cut him down—former Sword God or not. All the same, her opponent was *Gall Falion*. She remembered the moment of her humiliation on the day she’d arrived at the Sword Sanctum. She hadn’t even seen him in the moment he’d sent her flying.

A moment later, Gall Falion moved. He went in, with perfect execution, for a finishing blow.

“Sword of Light.”

She attacked with the most powerful sword technique in Sword God Style. Gall’s eyes caught it—the moment he gripped the hilt of his sword. It wasn’t the Reflection Blade. It was unmistakably Sword of Light. It just wasn’t like any Sword of Light Gall had ever seen.

“Water God Style Secret Technique: Flow.”

A slippery sensation swiped across Eris’s palms. From her stance, with her sword raised high above her head, she’d struck with a Sword of Light, met Gall’s lightning-fast intercepting strike, and been deflected. She’d sliced the tree behind Gall in two on a diagonal. Just before their blades parted, Gall applied the slightest pressure, making Eris’s torso ever so slightly tilt. Still in that posture at the end of her stroke, Eris was knocked off balance. That was more than enough. With Eris’s defenses down, Gall’s eyes found her neck.

He struck back. Perhaps it was the price he paid for using the teachings of another, unfamiliar style, but his strike could hardly be called fast. It didn’t reach the speed of light—speed of sound at best. At that distance, at that range, you didn’t need Sword of Light to kill your opponent. Any strike to cut off their head would do.

The blade came down like a guillotine. There was a sharp noise, like a clang or a cling, as metal met metal. His sword stopped. It was digging into Eris’s neck, but it had halted.

Gall’s eyes went wide. A man had appeared behind Eris, a warrior with green hair, a warrior carrying a white spear. He stood as if he were hiding behind Eris, blocking Gall’s blade like a guardian spirit.

If that had been Sword of Light, Gall thought for a split second. Then

“Gyaaaaah!”

Eris’s body twisted as she drew her sword from her right hip and raked it across Gall Falion’s body.



“...Ngh!” He swiftly leapt back, hitting the ground with a thud.

When his legs reached the ground, his torso wasn’t on top of them. Gall Falion’s upper half was airborne. It spun around three times, then fell back to earth.

Gall Falion watched his legs slowly topple over. He took in his own defeat.

“Damn...” he muttered from where he lay looking at the sky. He hadn’t seen the Superd hiding behind Eris. No, he *had* seen him. He just hadn’t paid any attention. With an opponent of her level, he hadn’t thought it mattered.

The truth was, Ruijerd hadn’t seen Eris’s Sword of Light. It was so fast that even a legendary warrior like him couldn’t perceive it. But Gall’s second strike was a different story. It wasn’t anywhere near that speed. He’d swung with the bare minimum power he needed to cut her head off. He’d been careless. Even then, an average warrior wouldn’t have had time to stop him. That had been Ruijerd Superdia standing by; the veteran warrior of Dead End. He’d lived for centuries. Of course he’d seen it. Of course he stopped it. Gall had misjudged Ruijerd. Eris had trusted the Superd to have her back. If Eris had held any uncertainty, if she’d doubted even for a moment that Ruijerd might not stop the blow, then Gall Falion might have had his opening.

“Why didn’t you use a Sword God Style technique?” Eris demanded of Gall where he lay on his back, as blood dripped from her neck. The battle had only lasted a moment, but her forehead was drenched with sweat.

“I thought I’d lose.”

From the first strike, if he’d raised his sword above his head like Eris and attacked with a top-speed Sword of Light, he would have won—and he hadn’t done that. He couldn’t. In the back of his mind, he’d seen his fight with Gino Britz. He’d never doubted his sword or his skill then, and Gino had torn through both with total ease, and he’d lost. He’d shattered his right

hand as his opponent threw him onto his ass in the training hall. He remembered everyone's eyes, and Gino looking down at him. That memory had dulled the will behind his first Sword of Light. Gall Falion was a genius swordsman. He had the name of Sword God, but he was full of enough brilliance to rise to Water Emperor if he'd been in a Water God Style hall. That was why he'd used the Water God Style technique. He was confident that he couldn't lose with that. Defiant, even.

He couldn't have done it back when he went by the name of Sword God. He had to act the part. As Sword God, he'd felt a sense of duty to only use Sword God Style techniques. Not this time. There was no downside in using a Water God Style technique to parry Sword of Light so that he could then use a surer method. That was why he'd tried to provoke Eris with his words, to make her move first. For that matter, cutting off Rudeus's arms as Geese had instructed him to was another thing he never would have done in his former position. The gears must have been out of alignment from the start, ever since he lost to Gino Britz. Gall Falion's old confidence was gone along with his old strength. The greatest swordsman of them all no longer existed.

"You were right. I'm a nobody who's lost his nerve," Gall said. He didn't make excuses. The person who believed in her skill had won, and the one who couldn't had lost. It was that simple. Everything he'd said before the battle sounded pathetic now. If he was going to make speeches like that, he should have attacked first. He really was a nobody—to Eris, he probably looked lower than a village drunk.

The sense that he had to fight Orsted, that he couldn't end things here, that he wanted one last bit of glory... That was what had pressed him to accept Geese's invitation. He couldn't believe he'd thought he could challenge Orsted as he was. He could hardly bring himself to laugh at the thought.

"...Who knows what I was thinking."

Looking down at him, Eris thought, *How pitiful*. An unintelligible sadness welled up inside her as she watched this man, who had once made her tremble, meet his end.

That was why she asked him, "...Do you have any last words?"

Gall moved just his eyes to look up at Eris. That girl with the red hair. Ever since the first time he saw her, he'd thought she had a gift. She was rough around the edges, but she had more raw potential than Ghislaine. But he hadn't for a second thought that she'd be the one to kill him. He'd always thought of her as below him—that if they fought, he would always win.

"The sword you wield only for yourself is pure, and a pure sword is the sharpest. People change. A blade you wield for another will be strong, but it will be influenced by them. Hesitate once, and afterward, you'll be haunted by that hesitation. Your blade will dull. That's what happened to me. I met a woman, then had a child. I trained my students. While I was hung up on crap like what the Sword God ought to do, I went dull." As Gall's grasp on consciousness grew weaker, he felt the words continue to pour out of him. He didn't have anything he needed to say. He didn't have any words he wanted to leave behind. He hadn't thought before about what he might say at the moment of his death. He didn't think he'd die in a place like this. His thoughts simply came pouring out of his mouth.

"Eris. I always knew you were something. You stayed strong. I thought you'd been taken in by love, but you're free. You're still free."

A thick stream of blood came gurgling out of his mouth, but Gall didn't bother to wipe it away. He held the sword he still gripped out to Eris.

"...Take it."

"All right."

The act bore no relation to his words, but Eris accepted it at once. Gall's hand, so close to death, was frighteningly cold, but the grip on his sword was hot.

"Hah..." Gall exhaled as he watched her take the sword. He didn't have enough strength left to take another breath.

"The strong live free... I like that..." His arm fell.

Sword God Gall Falion was dead.

Eris knelt in silence. She took the scabbard from Gall's waist, sheathed the sword in it, then pushed it through her own belt.

“Whew...” She let out a deep breath as she took a scroll from her pocket. It was a beginner-tier scroll of healing magic. She’d held on to it in case of an emergency ever since she’d received it. She held it up to the spot where blood trickled from her neck, then poured mana into it. The wound closed in an instant.

“...Eris.”

“Let’s go help Rudeus.”

“Yes.”

With that, the two of them turned to go...but after a few steps, Eris stopped. She turned back. Taking in Gall Falion’s awful corpse, she clenched her fist. Then, she recited a spell. Long, long ago, Rudeus had told Eris that if nothing else, she ought to remember this spell. She and Ghislaine had practiced it over and over again.

“—Fire Ball.” A flaming sphere burst from Eris’s hand and set Gall Falion’s body alight. Eris didn’t wait to watch as the flames engulfed it. She turned and set off quickly from that place. The fire spread to the nearby trees, giving off a plume of smoke like a beacon. It went on burning, undisturbed, until the flames naturally died away.

Chapter 5: Kalman III vs. Kalman II and Co.

OGRE GOD MARTA was on the rampage. The giant ogre swept through like a hurricane, smashing through rows of trees and turning up the earth. Carried along by the shockwaves, we found ourselves separated from the battlefield. Zanoba and Dohga were handling the big guy. The Ogre God was supposed to be a straightforward monster with brute strength, so they matched up well. No one could beat Blessed Child Zanoba on strength alone, and Dohga did well against aggressive opponents. I didn't *think* I needed to worry.

I didn't have the luxury of worrying about anyone except myself. In front of me stood Number Seven of the Seven Great Powers, North God Kalman III, Alexander Rybak. This was one half of the duo that'd pushed me into the ravine. On top of that, I didn't have the Version One this time, and the updated Version Two was incomplete. I couldn't relax. I couldn't hold anything back. Victory would go to whoever moved first. I'd open with Quagmire—

“I was waiting!”

Or so I thought. North God Kalman III made us wait. Of course, our opponent was a North God warrior. He could just as easily *pretend* to wait, then take us by surprise.

I put a Quagmire in place, then followed it up with a Stone Cannon.

“Before we fight, I want to talk a little!” He deflected the Stone Cannon harmlessly. *Or, wait. Did it go off course?* Whichever it was, it changed trajectory in midair and shot away. Not only that, even though I'd definitely put a Quagmire under the kid's feet, he wasn't sinking.

Is this the power of the North God?! No, never mind. I know about the King Dragon Blade's abilities.

“You have every right to be angry. Someone cut your arms off and threw you into a ravine. I'm sure you're itching to fight. But please, wait a

little longer. When I've said my piece, I'm all yours. Even a runt like you is surely capable of waiting while two great warriors talk?"

Did he call me a runt?! Asshole! I'll send you home in pieces!

Or, I guess I'd have thought that if I had more of a flare for the dramatic, but I couldn't muster up the anger. From the perspective of one of the Seven Great Powers I was a runt. I'd been boosted so high lately the perspective felt refreshing, if anything.

I didn't want to hold off. He might be stalling to buy time, and I wanted to win quickly so we could go help the rest of the team. I took a step back and looked at Sandor. Just like Alexander, he made no move to attack. And I had no hope of winning this alone.

"Sorry," Sandor said with a shrug. He stepped forward, then said, "... All right, what is it, stranger?"

"Stranger? You call me, your blood, a stranger?"

"Isn't this the first we've met?"

"The first time we met was when I came out of my mother's belly, Dad."

Why was Sandor playing dumb?

"Enough with this. I know you, even underneath that ugly helmet."

The Man-God had gotten a look at me, so Alexander probably knew everything too.

"You are North God Kalman II, Alex Rybak!"

"Alec, you're stepping on my line," Sandor said. He sighed as he took his helmet off to reveal black hair and a middle-aged face. Alec had the same crop of black hair. Now that I got a look at them, the family resemblance was strong.

"You're supposed to defeat me, then say 'You were a worthy opponent. I would at least look upon your face at the end,' then take the helmet off..."

"Forget about that! I thought you were dead... What've you been *doing*!?"

“...Taking on apprentices and teaching my skills as I pleased. Though not long ago, I was inspired by Her Majesty Queen Ariel of the Asura Kingdom to become a knight.”

“Apprentices? What were you doing taking on apprentices after you surrendered your sword to me and set aside North God Style?!” Anger flashed in little Alec’s eyes. I didn’t know what had happened between them, but Sandor’s words had touched a nerve.

“Alec, I didn’t set aside North God Style.”

“Liar! You don’t even have a sword now!”

“Hmm.” Sandor raised his staff and looked at it. It was made from metal, and I was pretty sure he’d said it was an ordinary staff, but maybe it had some special power. It *looked* ordinary, though.

“I just think fighting this way makes you stronger,” he said.

Alec was thunderstruck. “That’s idiotic! You want me to believe that old stick is stronger than the King Dragon Sword?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Alec, that sword is the strongest in the world. I wielded it for a hundred years, so I know it better than anyone.”

“Then...why?”

“That sword is *too* strong,” Sandor replied simply, like he was making an obvious point. “Once you’ve got that sword in your hand, nothing stands a chance against you. Not the most enormous beast, the most cunning monster, or the most steadfast warrior. I won battle after battle, and I became a hero.”

Sandor paused and regarded Alexander. “Only then when I stopped, I had a thought. I was a hero. Wasn’t everything the same as before I’d taken up the sword? Was the North God II, Alex Rybak, *really* strong?” Sandor cast his eyes downward. “Once I’d had that thought, I could no longer fight as I had. Not to deny my own battles nor my allies, of course... I realized I was finished as a hero. That’s why I surrendered the role of the North God as a hero to you, while I went to spread the teachings of North God Kalman I.”

I couldn’t help but feel left out of this. I wasn’t really following, but here goes: Alex (Sandor) the dad had gotten tired of fighting, relinquished

his symbolic sword, and gone to spread his school of fighting. His kid (Alexander) was mad about that. I mean, I can't blame the kid entirely. I'd probably be pissed too if my dad dumped something so heavy on me and then walked out.

Child abandonment—pretty uncool.

“So that’s how we ended up with Auber—with the eccentrics?”

“That was one of the paths shown to us by North God Kalman I.”

“I don’t recognize the legitimacy of the eccentrics. That isn’t North God Style,” Alexander said, shaking his head with undisguised disdain.

Auber, huh... Well, he wasn’t a swordsman, that’s for sure. If anything, he was more like a ninja.

“It’s not even *sword* fighting, is it?” Alexander went on.

“The First North God Kalman wielded a sword, but he taught that one need not rely only on the sword.”

“What, and *that’s* why you’re using that old stick?”

“Yes. With this, I can feel myself getting stronger. Knowing one is growing makes one stronger still.”

“...I don’t get it,” little Alec said unhappily.

He was still young. Once he’d decided something was one way, he couldn’t see it differently.

“Now, Alec, It’s my turn to ask you. What are *you* doing here?”

“I came to defeat Orsted. I’m going to defeat the Dragon God and become number two of the Seven Great Powers.”

“Aiming high, eh? Makes a father proud,” Sandor said with a smile.

Um, Sandor? Hate to bring this up when you’re all bursting with pride, but you’re on my team, right? You’re not going to suddenly say, “I’ll give you a hand then!” and switch sides. Right?

“Well, I’ll be fighting against you this time, but I suppose you’re going to strike me down to challenge Orsted.”

“Naturally. I don’t care if you’re my opponent. I will make the name of North God Kalman III one I don’t have to be ashamed of.”

A name you don't have to be ashamed of? Seriously? Although I guess you get hung up on stuff like that when your dad and your family are famous.

Still, I didn't exactly feel like cheering on little Alec's dreams.

"That's not all," he said. "I will wipe those Superd devils from existence!"

"Huh?" Sandor looked perplexed. "The Superd aren't devils. You saw them when you came to the village, didn't you?"

Alec nodded readily. "That's not important. Everyone *thinks* of the Superd as devils. If I kill them all, I'll be remembered as a hero for all eternity."

"That's not what a hero would do."

"It isn't, is it? If I get picky about methods, I'll never surpass your great deeds. My name will never outshine that of North God Kalman II."

"So outshining me is the same as becoming a hero?"

"Exactly!"

Sandor turned to me, his mouth half open. Then, he bowed. "I'm terribly sorry, Master Rudeus," he said. "I thought I could convince my idiot son. It turns out he's even more of an idiot than I thought."

"...It does look that way," I agreed.

Alec, it seemed, was a slave to the word *hero*. Rather than become a hero through heroic deeds, he just wanted to become famous so everyone would make a fuss over him.

Anyone with half a brain would point out, *that's not how it works. Don't ask me the details of how it works, but it sure as hell doesn't work like that.*

"Let's stop him."

"Yeah."

Sandor donned his helmet and raised his staff. Behind him, I spread my arms, ready to provide back-up. Alec glared at us, still grumpy. First, he'd had his choices disapproved of, then he'd been the subject of exasperated scorn. He was seething with anger and had no way to let it out.

“...You think you can defeat me with an old stick and that deadweight amateur? When I wield the King Dragon Blade?”

“Of course I do,” Sandor said confidently. “I’m going to put you in your place.”

At the words “put you in your place,” Alec’s patience finally snapped.

“You’re *dead!*”

Thus the battle between Kalman II and Kalman III began.

“Yaaaaah!”

Alec attacked first, slashing down on the diagonal at Sandor. He wielded the huge sword effortlessly with one hand.

“Whoa!” Sandor parried its devastating mass with his staff. Alec lost his balance...and yet his defense didn’t drop. With formidable poise, he twisted around and came at Sandor again.

Sandor reacted like he’d seen it coming. As Alec spun around to strike at him like a hurricane, Sandor parried once more. As he parried, he used the principle of leverage to sweep Alec’s legs out from under him. Just like that, Alec—no, he wasn’t knocked down. He leapt as though to jump over Sandor, then plunged back to the ground with impossible speed. It was an insane move, but I recognized where it had come from. He was using the power of the magic sword, King Dragon Blade Kajakut—gravity manipulation.

“Grrraaaar!”

Sandor was ready for it. With his back still to Alec, he parried a blow from the King Dragon Blade, then another, then another. He turned a little each time until he was facing Alec.

Alec’s blows weren’t easy to parry. Every time he kicked off, he left an indent in the ground, and the shockwave when he swung his sword struck trees. Those trees began to topple, creaking, to the ground. I was

standing a ways off, and the vacuum wave he generated was strong enough to bite into my cheeks.

The blow didn't hit Sandor. The guy might have been retired, but he was still *the* North God. He went on parrying Alec's strikes without ever looking worried. With his ability to manipulate gravity, Alec could move as freely and as acrobatically as he liked, which made him impossible to predict. Sandor was keeping up with him all the same. It *looked* like he wasn't moving at first glance, but his body almost quivered as he made minute adjustments to get into a more advantageous position.

So this was what a fight between North Gods looked like. They weren't that fast. Maybe because of all the training I'd done with Eris and Orsted, I was able to follow their movements. They were so tightly packed and so unpredictable that although I could follow the fight, I couldn't help.

“Take thaaaat!”

“Whoaaaaa!”

Man, these guys made a *racket*.

There was no time for thoughts like that, though. I steadied my breathing, then looked hard at the two of them. If they were evenly matched, my intervention could swing the battle. Even with the Demon Eye of Foresight, reading their next moves was no easy task. Even if I couldn't read Alec, I knew how Sandor moved. At the very least, he was also easier to predict than Alec. He had a pattern.

He went right, then left. When his opponent got directly behind him, he had a pattern...

“There!” I fired a Stone Cannon. *Whoosh*—it went barreling in a straight line right into Alec.

Scratch that, it wasn't straight, and it wasn't a direct hit. Its path warped. Even as it left an indent in Alec's armor, it slid off the surface and disappeared into the depths of the forest.

It *did* throw Alec off balance, though.

“Hah!” Sandor didn't miss his opening. His blow slammed into Alec's solar plexus.

“Nngh...!” Alec let out a grunt, but at the same time, he leapt. He was heading straight at me.

He's fast!

“Butt out, runt!”

He steps in sharply. Slashes down on the diagonal.

Looking with the Demon Eye of Foresight, I took the blow on my remaining gauntlet.

“Oof...” The moment it hit, a crushing weight pressed down on my legs. The gauntlet cracked and I sank to my knees. I thought my left hand was going to come flying off...but then, with a grinding noise, the black arm parried the sword. The Atofe Hand was sturdy.

“That arm...!” Alec exclaimed. “No way. Is that *grandma's*?!”

“Electric!” I yelled, releasing the mana I'd stored up in my other hand. Alec's body was bathed in purple lightning. I poured mana into my left hand, preparing to fire a Stone Cannon at his face at point-blank range.

“Yooouuuagh!”

Only, Alec didn't stop. Curving his back like a shrimp to dodge my Stone Cannon, he spun on one foot and slashed at my legs.

I jumped out of the way. By then, Alec had already regained his footing. I saw his blade coming straight for my neck.

“Yaaah!” At the last second, Sandor came charging into Alec from one side, ramming him with his staff. Alec went flying straight off in a tailspin to the side...and came back to earth in a gentle arc that ignored the laws of gravity.

“...Hmph.” At a glance, he didn't seem to have taken any damage. It didn't look like Electric had done much either.

Was this the power of the sword? The quality of his armor? Or was he just being stoic? Maybe he was trained differently. Perhaps his body was *made* differently. Anything was possible.

“Looks like I held too much back,” Alec said, like he was on a losing streak in a fighting game. “Guess it's time to get a little more serious...”

All things considered, this wasn't a bad situation.

If we kept this up, we had a chance of winning. Sandor would be the front-liner, and I'd support him. If we each landed a hit every time, eventually we'd be able to bring Alec down. North God Kalman III was a tough opponent, but Sandor was strong too. They were evenly matched. I'd be the deciding factor.

I'm no deadweight! I thought, just as Sandor discouragingly said, "This is bad."

You're kidding. We've got the advantage! You haven't taken any damage.

That last exchange of blows had broken the Zaliff Gauntlet, but the Atofe Hand had even better specs. We could still do this.

"He's holding his power in reserve for his fight with Orsted later. He's going to get stronger and stronger."

Ah, crap. He was holding back. He was totally toying with us.

"How much longer will Miss Roxy be?"

"I don't know." She was supposed to send word when she was ready. It had already been half a day, so I thought she should be good to go soon. Unless Eris or Zanoba had gone down and the enemy had steamrolled Roxy too.

"He's much stronger than he was when I knew him. I may have promised a little more than I can deliver," Sandor said meekly.

Don't be like that. You can still try. I'll do my best to support you. I'm no deadweight, I swear! I'll buoy you up like a helium balloon! Only, I can't manipulate gravity, so maybe only emotionally.

"Let's buy some time for now."

"R-right." With this quick conference over, Sandor charged forward, and Alec ran once more to meet him.

"Uuah!"

"Grrryaah!"

They got stuck into another exchange of blows. It was just as Sandor had said: I couldn't pick up on anything different at first glance, but Sandor was no longer deflecting Alec's blows perfectly. With every parry, his

stance degraded a little further. The level of Alec's attacks had changed—they looked the same, but I guess he put more weight behind them.

If he got the advantage over Sandor, I wouldn't be able to squeeze in any direct hits with my Stone Cannon. The number he parried, deflected, or evaded would increase.

I stopped shooting. Instead, I used magic to shape the earth. First of all, I'd put a stop to the bouncy, physics-defying aerial maneuvers. That'd take the pressure off Sandor a bit and give him more flexibility for how he attacked.

Then, time to reintroduce my Stone Cannons.

“Earth Lance!” I raised pillars of earth to surround the two of them. I added, “Earth Net!” About fifty centimeters above Sandor’s head, I formed a net out of the earth. If I blocked off the space above them, those gravity-defying leaps would...

“You pest!” One hit and the net was down. That was a no go, then.

“What’s the matter, Dad? Is that all you’ve got?”

This was bad. Sandor was getting backed into a corner. It wasn’t a difference in skill. Without a doubt, the difference was in the weapons. Every blow from the King Dragon Blade bent Sandor’s staff further. I was frantically shooting Stone Cannons to back him up, but they were all thrown off course. He seemed to have decided to deal with me later, because even when they grazed him, he totally ignored them.

Dammit. We weren’t even going to buy time at this rate. Things would get worse and worse until we lost.

“Gaaagh!”

Then it happened. A shadow came hurtling at Alec from the side, like a comet. A red-haired woman with a sword in each hand who threw herself at Alec with all her strength. Alec stopped that attack, but then ate another from Sandor and was thrown back. The red swordswoman followed, striking again. Alec made another landing that spat in the face of gravity, then immediately lashed out with his giant blade.

The red swordswoman couldn’t respond in time.

“Oof...!”

Behind her, following like a shadow, was a green-haired warrior who diverted the strike.

“Graaah!”

The mad dog howled. Steel flashed, running right at Alec's throat, but something invisible turned it aside. The blade dug into his shoulder, but his armor was unexpectedly sturdy and stopped the blow, leaving only a scratch. The mad dog didn't chase too far. The second she saw the attack hadn't hit home, she jumped back. The great sword swept across where she'd stood, slicing through a few strands of her hair.

There was distance between them now.

I saw red hair and green hair, standing with their backs to me.

“Sorry for the wait, Rudeus!” Eris said, casting a quick look my way. Ruijerd didn't turn around, but he probably used his third eye to check I was okay.

They'd come to help us. If I were a maiden, it'd have been love at first sight.

Hold me! Ravish me!

“Oh, come on...” While I was having my maiden moment, Alec looked taken aback. Or more accurately, he looked shocked.

“You can't mean Gall Falion is dead?” he demanded. I gave Ruijerd a questioning look and he nodded.

Holy cow. Sure, it had been two-on-one, but Eris and Ruijerd took out the *Sword God*.

“I knew he'd stepped down as *Sword God*, but I didn't think he'd go down so easily... I suppose I overestimated him.” Alec's tone was haughty, but he looked upset. Come to think of it, he and Gall had seemed pretty chummy back when they shoved me into the ravine.

“I didn't know him long...but he was a good man...” Alec's demeanor had changed. All sense of easy confidence had evaporated.

“I thought he'd wipe the floor with the likes of those two. We were going to fight Orsted together...” Alec gripped his sword and dropped low into his stance.

Something was coming. Sensing the overwhelming aura rolling off him, Eris and Ruijerd's hackles went up and they too lowered their stances.

If he was just getting serious now, then he was too late. Eris and Ruijerd had joined me and Sandor. It was four on one. Even if the *one* in the equation was one of the Seven Great Powers, equipped with the world's strongest sword.

“In my right hand, a sword.” Alec raised the point of the sword held in his right hand up to the sky. “In my left hand, a sword.”



He gripped the hilt with his left hand. A two-handed grip. Up until now he'd been swinging the greatblade with one hand, but now he held it in two. Was this his true fighting style, then?

Sandor cried out sharply, "We're finished! Flee!" He dived to one side.

He was too late.

"With these, mine arms, countless lives shall I claim. A hundred million deaths I will deliver."

Alec raised the King Dragon Blade high above his head.

"My name is North God Alexander Rybak."

I realized I was floating. Not just me. Eris, Ruijerd, and even Sandor, who'd tried to dive away. We were all hovering in midair. All the fallen leaves and branches were floating too. This was the King Dragon Blade's gravity manipulation.

We didn't fall, and we didn't climb any higher. I flailed my arms and legs, but I couldn't retreat.

As I hung there, totally defenseless, I could see power crackling through every fiber of Alec's body.

"Now, I avenge my friend and ally!"

Shiiit. Just then, my body started to move of its own accord. I concentrated mana in both hands and released a sonic wave. I sent Eris, Ruijerd, and Sandor flying far away. Right after that, I pulled the fragments of the Zaliff Gauntlet back to me, then pointed the tip of the Stone of Absorption at Alec. Whatever was in the space between me and the sword disappeared, and I fell back to earth. I threw the Stone of Absorption aside, then drove all my mana into my arms, and pointed them toward Alec who was already swinging down his greatblade—

"Secret Technique: Gravity Fracture."

There was an explosion and a flash.

I lost consciousness.

When I woke up, I was on top of a tree. I'd been sent flying, which I knew because my armored leg was broken. The leg segment was smashed to pieces and my leg was bent at a weird angle. My legs weren't the only casualties; my chassis had been smashed into fragments too, and there was an intermittent pain in my chest. My ribs were probably broken.

"Ack... Ahh, ahh." I coughed, and pain flared in my chest, but I could still talk. Right away, I cast healing magic on my wounds.

"How far was I... Whoa?!" When I tried to raise myself up, the tree branch supporting me snapped. I went tumbling down a fair distance, crashing through branches as I went.

I didn't reach the ground. I must have been really high up.

I saw a crater. It was about twenty meters across, right next to the ravine. It hadn't been there before. It must have just been made. Probably by that attack just now.

"Holy hell," I said. Then, I looked around. Over in the direction of the Superd Village, I saw something shining. I knew that light.

"Is that—whooa?!" Another branch snapped. Banging into other branches as I went, this time I fell all the way to the ground.

"Ow..." I'd gone and hurt myself again just after using healing magic. Right away, I cast more of it to patch myself up. Whatever was going on, I needed to get a handle on the situation. Where was Eris? Ruijerd? Sandor? What about Alec?

I stood up, then realized with a start that someone was standing right in front of me. I jumped, then got into a fighting stance. The person before me wasn't an enemy.

"Sandor!" I cried.

"If it isn't Master Rudeus... Could I trouble you for another healing spell?" he asked. He was covered in wounds. His armor was half in ruins, his helmet was shattered, and blood trickled down from his head. His left arm dangled, limp.

“Yes, of course.” I laid my hand on him and healed his wounds.

“Much appreciated.”

Barely taking in his thanks, I asked, “What about Eris and Ruijerd?”

If even Sandor had taken wounds this bad, those two wouldn’t have made it out unscathed either.

“Minor injuries. It was a good thing you allowed them to get some distance. They should be fine even without healing magic. They’re still unconscious over that way.”

That was a relief.

“What about North God Kalman III?”

“After he saw we were down, he went on ahead.”

“He didn’t try to finish us off?”

“That last technique of his was the strongest in North God Style. He probably assumed he didn’t have to.”

First pushing me into the ravine, and now this. The kid seemed a few cards short of a full deck. That had saved our skin, but even so...

We’d let him get past us. He was headed for Orsted. *Orsted* would probably win in a fight between them. I mean, he was supposed to have fought Alexander and the King Dragon Blade in all the loops up until now. In the plan, he wouldn’t go out of his way to fight unless he had to, but if he did, I was sure he’d crush him without breaking a sweat, just like with Water God Reida.

That last technique gave me pause, though. Orsted wasn’t the only one in the Superd Village. There were Superd, who’d only just recovered from illness, and then Julie and Norn... If Orsted had to block or deflect that attack on someone else’s behalf, it would take a considerable amount of mana—even for him. Fighting a battle on the defensive was more difficult than the offensive. If Orsted couldn’t protect everyone, they’d all die.

“Can you still fight, Sandor?” I asked.

“You’re going?”

“This isn’t over yet. I saw a light in the forest just now. The light of a summoning. If Roxy’s got everything ready, we’re just getting started.”

Just as I said this, two green-haired men came running toward us out of the forest. They were both Superd warriors, though neither one was Ruijerd. When they saw us, they approached us right away.

“We have a message from Roxy. The summoning worked.”

“All right.”

The Superd nodded.

“Right,” Sandor announced, “I’ll dive in first. I’ll slow him down some.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t.”

After this brief exchange, Sandor set off running.

“You take care of Eris and Ruijerd. When they wake up, tell them to come and back us up,” I said to one of the Superd.

“Understood!”

“Please show me the way.”

“Understood!” Leaving Eris and Ruijerd with the Superd who had nodded before, the other warrior and I ran off to find Roxy. We went there directly, jumping over tree roots and plunging through undergrowth. With the Magic Armor broken, I couldn’t move that fast...or rather, I guess because it had stopped working. It was *heavy*.

Thus, on the way, I pulled off the Updated Version Two Magic Armor so I could run unencumbered. North God Kalman III was stronger than I’d thought. I couldn’t back down now. Not when the real fight had only just begun.

“Rudeus...!”

We reached our destination. Roxy wasn’t there, only a Superd warrior and Elinalise.

Which meant, *all according to plan*.

“You look terrible...”

Despite patching myself up with healing magic, my armor and my clothes were in tatters. When Elinalise saw me, her eyes went wide, but her

face smoothed back to a neutral expression in seconds.

“It’s ready,” she said.

There it was, behind her, crudely and quickly sketched. A magic circle. It had already stopped glowing. This was the same circle that had been on one of the scrolls rendered useless at the bottom of the Ravine of the Earthwurm. That scroll’s maker was Roxy Greyrat.

The circle was broken, crushed under the weight of a massive set of armor. The Magic Armor. The duplicate Magic Armor we’d made. As we’d predicted, there was a chance that it might get destroyed in the fight. This was the set we’d had to leave at the workshop because there was no room for it in the office armory. It was the one trump card that had escaped the destruction of the office.

“The Magic Armor Version One.”

All right, time for round two.

Chapter 6: Kalman III vs. Dead End and Co.

I BOOTTED UP THE VERSION ONE, then went after the North God. I devoted myself to the chase. Running through the forest, dodging past trees. As I ran, I dug deep for all the magic left in my body. I'd consumed a decent portion in the fight with the North God, but at that level, I shouldn't have even used ten percent. I still had magic to spare.

Only, since earlier, the thundering that had gone on without a break the whole time we were fighting the North God had stopped. No matter how well-matched Zanoba and Dohga were to fight him, maybe downing a God-tier opponent had always been out of the question.

I hope they're okay.

What if they weren't? Then we'd have both the North God and the Ogre God to deal with. Would my magic hold out? Or would it cut out partway through like it had in the fight with Orsted?

No, the real fight comes now. Stop worrying about what comes next. Start with what's in front of you, one thing at a time.

First up was my number one goal: North God Kalman III.

By the time I arrived on the scene, Sandor had already lost. He was on his butt with his back against a tree, limp, face down. There was no weapon in his hand. That staff of his was bent and lying on the ground nearby.

Alexander looked down at him. North God Kalman III had conquered his predecessor.

“How long are you going to keep playing this game, Dad? You know by now, don’t you? You don’t have a hope of beating me. Not without a magic sword-class weapon.”

Sandor didn't answer. Maybe he was already unconscious. Surely he wasn't *dead*.

"Or is this another strategy? Playing dead. The eccentrics are all good at that, aren't they? Doing whatever it takes to win and achieve their goal. I admire that approach. Though if I'm honest, I think Auber and the others went too far... You taught them that, Dad. Why do you reject me?"

Sandor didn't reply. He just sat there, in silence.

"Well, it's about time I was going," Alec said and turned—toward me.

"...What?!" He looked like he'd seen a bear or something. I imagined what was going through his mind. *I wasn't expecting this encounter. There's no way this guy can be here. That Magic Armor, how? It was broken.* That was the sort of face he made.

"Listen here, my son, and I'll answer that for you." Only a few seconds had passed. As Alec stood there frozen, Sandor stood up.

"Playtime is over. You're right, without a magic sword I cannot defeat you. That's why I borrowed one from Eris. Only, it really is the bare minimum. With just a magic sword, I wouldn't have much of a chance. So I waited. I held on and on, played dead, and waited. So that I could be sure of victory." As he spoke, Sandor drew a sword from behind him.

It was Eris's second sword. The Magic Sword Eminence.

"You want to know why I refuse to accept you? You want to be a hero, but in that pursuit you sully yourself with deeds unworthy of heroism. If you want to be a hero, act like it. Don't steal victory through underhanded tactics! Don't buy fame by beating down the weak. Find an opponent greater than yourself, against whom you have no chance of success. Challenge them, win, and claim your glory. Not as I did, but as the first North God Kalman did."

Sandor drew his sword from its scabbard with an air of lofty detachment and held it ready.

The Magic Sword Eminence was short. Wielding it, Sandor looked as mighty as befitting the name of North God.

Meanwhile, Alec shot a glance back over his shoulder.

“So that’s it. You were waiting for backup… Geese did tell me not to let Rudeus get into the Magic Armor. All he meant was not to let an opponent get into peak condition. You can’t seriously think you can win with just two of you against me *and* the King Dragon Blade?”

“Who said there were two of us?” Sandor said. As if in answer, the bushes behind him rustled, and out stepped a man and a woman. The woman had red hair, and the man green. It was Eris and Ruijerd. They must have regained consciousness while I was off getting the Magic Armor. They still had some visible injuries, but both were way tougher than me. Their injuries wouldn’t hinder them in a fight.

Eris glanced my way. The look she gave me was strong and loaded with meaning. It said she trusted me to have her back. Ruijerd gave me the same look. He hadn’t seen the Magic Armor before, but his third eye must have shown him it was me. He unflinchingly trusted me to support him.

And I would do exactly that. I’d support all three of them, including Sandor.

After all the effort of bringing out the big guns, of summoning Magic Armor Version One, all I was going to do was support. It felt a bit pathetic. Then again, this was how we’d done things since way back. Eris was front and center, Ruijerd controlled, and I ran support. We didn’t need to discuss it.

We had one extra in the mix, but we had a kick-ass lineup.

“Bring it.” At Sandor’s words, our second round with the North God began.

The first to attack was Eris. She struck at her typical top speed along the shortest possible arc toward Alexander.

Alec parried it. As the attacks continued, too fast for my eyes to follow, he parried them without breaking a sweat, from time to time throwing out a counter strike. There were no breaks between Eris’s attacks, but that was because I couldn’t keep up—there *were* openings.

He countered, but all his counters were rebuffed. That was Ruijerd. Every time Alec tried to exploit a hole in Eris's defense, Ruijerd swung his spear and stole his chance. Ruijerd had become Eris's shadow. No matter what misstep she made, so long as Ruijerd was there she had no weakness.

Except for how Alec sometimes ignored gravity. Just when you thought you had him off balance, he'd make some bizarre contortion leading straight into an unpredictable move. Immediately after doing a big, acrobatic maneuver to evade, he'd suddenly plummet back to the ground and be back on the offensive.

Even Ruijerd couldn't keep up with moves like that. Those were the ones that Sandor blocked—Sandor, or the North God Kalman II, who was more familiar than anyone with gravity manipulation.

Must've been tough for little Alec. Sandor targeted him at the point he hit the ground, or when he was in midair. Alexander dodged the attack itself, but he couldn't move the way he wanted. By burning energy on simple mischief, he ended up taking more hits. If he tried to put some distance between them, he'd get a faceful of my magic. He might be able to use the King Dragon Blade to throw off my Stone Cannon, which even the great Orsted hadn't been able to dodge completely. By using the Stone of Absorption a split second beforehand I could delay his reaction and reliably get a few grazing shots on him. I wouldn't get a direct hit, but an obviously dense barrage would slow him down and stop him from putting distance between himself and Eris. Alexander had deflected the Electric I'd cast with timing I thought was sure to hit, but I wouldn't give him time to catch his breath. Thus, he wouldn't have to time use his ultimate weapon from earlier.

“Ngh...!”

Alexander was faster and stronger than anyone else here. Maybe because he was in a hurry, maybe because he was panicking—he was sloppy. Every move he made was starting to show roughness around the edges. Our team, on the other hand, was sure and steady, and we were doing reliable damage. The battle was swinging in our favor. There was no need to do anything reckless—and besides, it's not like there was any one big move that would definitively take him down.

So if we just kept on fighting like we were—eventually, he'd come apart. Both endurance and magic became depleted the longer you used them. Who'd pushed themselves the hardest since the fight began? Who'd had the least left in the tank beforehand? As the fight went on, those things always became clear.

A blow caught Eris across the face. It was only a scratch, but as time went on, the scratches mounted. Was she running on fumes?

No. There was a definitive weak point. Sandor. North God Kalman II, formerly of the Seven Great Powers, was our weak point. What could you expect? The third North God had hit him with his ultimate attack, after which he'd protected Eris and Ruijerd, then he'd gotten beaten to a pulp keeping North God Kalman III in place until we showed up. Even looking on from the sidelines, it was obvious that the vigor had gone out of his movements. He was still moving. He was still doing his job. Possibly he was keeping up purely because Alexander was being sloppy. He was human, after all, and humans have limits.

Eris was a given, but even me, with my Demon Eye of Foresight that let me read my opponents' moves, and the legendary warrior Ruijerd were getting out of breath. This was a grueling fight. With every attack and counter, we walked on a razor's edge. Another ten minutes might see Sandor reach his limit.

Thankfully, we had power to spare. Unlike before, I was wearing the Magic Armor Version One. My light of sight was elevated, making it easier to see the situation and expanding the area I could support. If Sandor went down, I'd shift from what I was currently doing to support him.

Timing it to his pattern of attack, I wove together an Earth Lance from directly below with a Vacuum Wave from directly above. I also upped the frequency of Stone of Absorption. Alexander could ignore gravity to move in three dimensions, but only because he had the King Dragon Blade. I had verified that the Stone of Absorption worked on the King Dragon Blade's power. By using it more I'd be supporting less, but Alec's range would be limited. That'd take about a third of the load off of Sandor. A big chunk, sure, but still only a third. It wasn't enough for him to get his strength back and end the fight. Victory was still a long way off. I had to think harder.

...Should I just continuously deploy the Stone of Absorption? We'd lose my long-range attacks, but with the Magic Armor Version One I could do close-range combat too. If I shut down his acrobatic moves, that'd put us in a more favorable position...right? No, scratch that. Right now, Eris and Ruijerd and Sandor were confronting him at point-blank range. There was no room for the massive bulk of the Magic Armor. Even if I could match them for power and speed, without the skill to go with it I could just as easily trip them up.

What about buying time? I could give Sandor the chance to retreat and recover his strength. A few minutes, tops. That'd make a big difference, right?

Hold on... Alexander was still the North God. Even if he couldn't control gravity, he'd still have the skill to fight. Duh. Gravity control wasn't the core of his power. Even if, by shutting it down, I brought him down a rank, I was still two, or three, or maybe even more ranks lower than Sandor in close combat. Even with the Demon Eye of Foresight I couldn't follow all Alec's movements. I might end up placing a massive burden on Ruijerd and Eris. They were already starting to take minor wounds. The difference of a fingertip, a hair's breadth, could lead to a severed artery.

Eris was fighting at full pelt. Since early on she'd been attacking without pause, and yet every strike went wide. Alec was just that good. It was possible she was tired from her fight with the Sword God, or that Alec's ultimate attack from earlier had injured her somewhere, but as far as I could tell, Eris was giving the best performance of her life.

Only, I didn't know how long she could keep it up. Ruijerd had only just recovered from the plague. I knew he'd been bedridden until only a few days earlier. His form was good now, but it was possible he'd suddenly collapse.

What should I do? We won't lose, carrying on like this, but we can't win, either. I've got my magic, but Sandor's going to hit his limit some time. What should I do? How can I do this?

I agonized. *Do I deploy a max-power Stone of Absorption and risk going on the frontline? Or should I try and break the deadlock with a different spell? Reset the board?*

“Oof!”

Just then, Alexander's target shifted from Eris to Sandor. Because he wasn't blocking Eris's blows as much, cuts striped across Alexander's body. But of course, none of them could be a decisive blow.

I could see what he was after. He'd picked up on it too. If he took out Sandor, that would break the balance. If he just paid less attention to Eris and focused on bringing down Sandor, he could wrest victory from inevitable defeat.

Something chilling ran down my spine. Sandor would die. Then, Eris would die. Then Ruijerd and then, in a one-on-one fight, he'd kill me too.

We'd lose.

You should probably win this quick, then, don't you think?

Panic flooded me, which I simply couldn't afford right now. Anxiety made me doubt my actions and misjudge things. I started making little errors. Ruijerd managed to cover for me all the same. I was obviously a burden on him. This wasn't working. I needed something, one decisive play.

Right as I thought that, it happened. The decisive blow came, right out of the depths of the forest.

First came a lump of gray iron. It came hurtling out, rolled like a ball, then crashed into a tree and stopped. The hunk of iron soon moved—its helmet was askew, its heavy armor was dented. Blood ran from its head and poured unceasingly from its nose. Its face was dazed. Still, it kept hold of its weapons, scrunched up its simple and honest face with all its might, and glared at the opponent that had thrown it.

It was Dohga. The next one to come hurtling along was a slim figure. He'd already lost his armor and was naked from the waist up. His scrawny frame looked like it might come to pieces the way he came hurtling by. He crashed into Dohga.

Zanoba.

Then came the decisive blow. It had red skin and long fangs and was close to three meters tall, a mountain of muscle that dropped down from above like a monkey. A weird sound, neither *bam* nor *thud* nor *crash*, resounded when the musclebound brute hit the ground nearby.

It was Ogre God Marta. The second I saw him, my whole body froze and a shudder ran through me. Disordered thoughts whizzed through my skull.

We were in a delicate balance. Why were they here? Could we win? Were we doomed? Should we fall back? Or should we attack?

“Hey there, Ogre God!” Alexander looked thrilled with this turn of luck. As soon as he laid eyes on the Ogre God, a beaming smile spread across his face. Seeing it made me wonder if he’d been panicking the way I had.

Right, we weren’t the only ones struggling. That delicate balance we’d had meant he must have been struggling himself. He wanted to press on but we’d pinned him down. He wouldn’t lose, but at the same time, he didn’t have a plan to break through. He wanted to use his ultimate attack, but he couldn’t. Dragging on in those conditions would take a mental toll even on him.

“Great timing!” Alexander said. The Ogre God looked grumpy. Grumpy, and like he was wondering what the hell we were doing here. Earlier, Alec had looked at me like he’d seen a bear. The Ogre God now looked like a bear seeing a human.

Oh, this was bad. This was a delicate situation, ready to collapse given another ten minutes, and now our enemies had increased.

“Mind helping me out here?” Alexander asked.

The Ogre God nodded.

We no longer had any power to spare. I had to provide support against two targets now, so I was constantly running around the battlefield. I caught an opening and managed to heal Dohga and Zanoba. Both of them had been losing against the Ogre God. He moved with unbelievable speed for his huge frame, and every attack sent one of them flying. Zanoba ripped up a nearby tree and threw it at him, but the ogre came back and tossed him away like it hadn’t done any damage at all. Dohga attacked with his giant

axe. He might as well have been a mosquito for all the marks it left, then the Ogre God punched him back and he went sailing into the air as well. Dohga and Zanoba weren't powerless, and yet he brushed them off like dust. His power was overwhelming.

Alexander kept his attack up without change. Sandor was eking out the very last of his strength to keep going, but somehow, he was holding his ground.

Okay, not "somehow." Sandor wasn't giving ground, but Ruijerd was getting tired. He was pushing himself too hard. This was bad. *Real* bad. We weren't looking for a way to break the deadlock anymore. In a few more minutes, our line was going to collapse. We had to retreat. There was nothing behind us. We'd end up taking the fight to Orsted. Orsted wouldn't die, of course. He could swat them like bugs...this time.

Are you sure, though? Are you sure about this? That means you lose. Are you really okay with that?

Was there really no way to improve the situation? I had to stop one of them at least. *Think, Rudeus.* There had to be something. If I used every trick I had, I had to be able to fight back.

After losing almost all my scrolls, I'd managed to get the Version One back. I had its gatling gun, its bulk, its speed, its power. Wasn't there something I could do? Something, anything?

Anything...!

"Ugh!" Finally, Sandor fell to his knees. I stared at the Ogre God in despair. This guy was a runaway train. We would be doomed if I didn't stop him here. I wanted one more idea. Just one more. We'd had a small and precarious advantage, now we were being pushed into a precarious disadvantage, but I could still turn it around. If I could do something about the Ogre God, Zanoba and Dohga could change out with Sandor, and we could bring him back to the backline to let him recover.

I just needed one idea. Just *one*.

"Aaaahahahahahaaaa!"

Just then, a voice echoed around us, and at the same time, my shoulder grew hot.

Both Alec and Sandor's heads shot up and they looked around, like they recognized the voice.

"Things are getting pretty interesting here, huh?" the voice said. A second later, something black leapt from the undergrowth. The figure, clad in black armor and with a sword in one hand, faced the Ogre God head on.

"Graaaaah!" They swung at the Ogre God. There was incredible noise, somewhere between a *clang* and a *crack*, and the sword broke. Blood gushed from the arm the Ogre God had used to guard against the blow and he tottered back a few steps.

"Haaa!" The black figure didn't pay any attention to their broken sword. They closed in and threw a straight, sharp punch into the Ogre God's gut.

"Oof..." The Ogre God doubled over for a second and the figure threw a left hook. His head snapped around and he stumbled, but he didn't fall. Raising his uninjured arm, he punched the black figure. They went flying a few meters back, then spread their wings in midair, and landed lightly on the ground.

"Fwaaahahahaha! Good, good! I *like* that!" That was demon tongue, coming out of that black figure. I gulped.

"Lady Atofe...!"

It was Immortal Demon King Atofe. The most feared being on the Demon Continent was here in front of me.

"Why..."

She looked around at me and her face contorted into a savage grin.

"Heheheh. I smelt you were in trouble through my offshoot, so I thought the big fight must be close! I got here fast as I could! I've got no idea what's going on at all, but I made it in time! The Ogre God and Alec... Heheheh, fwaha...ha, fwaaahahahaha!" Atofe cackled so hard you had to wonder what was so funny. Her unsettling laughter echoed around the forest and left Alexander stunned.

Offshoot? What offshoot...?

Oh, right. She was talking about the arm. Apparently, it hadn't accurately conveyed the situation to her, but still, she'd made it. Atofe was

here. We had all the firepower we needed.

We could win this!

“I, Immortal Demon King Atofe, will wipe every last one of you from the face of the earth!”

Not every one of us, please! Ah, crap. Moore isn’t around.

What about the rest of her personal guard? *There’s no one to rein her in! She’s on the loose!*

“Or, that’s what I’d *like* to do...” she muttered. She faced off against the Ogre God. He was close to twice her size. Atofe was tall for a woman, but the Ogre God was *huge* in every dimension.

“Ogre God Marta!” Atofe cried.

“Am I to fight you next, then?” the Ogre God replied in fluent demon tongue. He spoke with a dignified air that didn’t match his exterior. *That’s God-tier for you, I guess.*

“My personal guard has conquered your puny Ogre Island! Leave here quietly, or we slaughter them all!”

The Ogre God stared at Atofe in shock. He was trying to work out the truth. Was she lying? There was one thing I knew. There was no way Atofe was smart enough to lie.

“Me, I’m happy to kill them all! In fact, I like that way best! Yes! Killing them all is best! Now fight me!”

Atofe spread her arms wide and stood ready to fight. Maybe the Ogre God got the sense from her posture that Atofe was for real. His next move was dramatic. He seemed to coil...and then he leapt, like a monkey, up into a tree. He looked down at us from his new vantage point.

“Hey...! Mister Ogre God?!” Alexander spluttered. At that moment, the Ogre God looked at Alec for the first time. Like he couldn’t care less.

Then, he said, “Me, go home. Island in trouble.” He spoke in human tongue. He had a strong accent, like he’d only just learnt it. I guess the Ogre God was better at Demon Tongue than Human Tongue. Still, he was bilingual, so good for him. Atofe couldn’t speak human tongue at all! And

she was fluent at speaking the Demon Tongue, but listening? No good at that in any language.

With that, the Ogre God jumped away from tree to tree and disappeared into the forest. Alexander watched him go, stunned.

He wasn't the only one. Ruijerd, Sandor, and I all stared after him, wide-eyed.

Then there was one. Alexander, all alone. Left surrounded by me, Eris, Ruijerd, Sandor, Zanoba, Dohga, and Atofe.

The Ogre God had gone home. Just like that.

“Right, our enemy is alone!”

“G-Grandmother...”

His dad was his enemy, and his grandma couldn't be reasoned with. You couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for him in this situation, standing there, dumbfounded. He looked lost.

There was one person here who wasn't sensitive enough to pick up on that sort of thing.

“Gaaah!” Eris saw an opening and struck Alec with all her strength.

“Ngh!” Alec guarded. He *guarded*. He didn't evade or deflect, he tried to guard. He tried to guard against the Sword God Style's ultimate attack, the Sword of Light. He tried to guard against an ultimate attack that was impossible to guard against.

Before I knew it, Alexander's left hand was flying, spraying up blood. Around and around it went.

“Oh.” The arm landed with a *thud* on the ground. That became the sign for the fight to recommence, the decisive move. There was hardly any structure to the fight as it started again.

If Alexander had had both arms, maybe he could have turned this around somehow. But alas! The hand holding all his cards had been cut off and sent flying. Without a left hand, this high-level, precariously balanced conflict wouldn't even be a fight anymore. And it wasn't. It only took five minutes. Alec, covered in wounds, went running pathetically away.

“Hah...hah...”

It wasn’t a tactical retreat. With fear and ragged breathing, he fled as if from death itself.

This was the North God. You wouldn’t believe he was one of the Seven Great Powers. He was like a new hire who got into a good high school, then a good university, then got hired at a good company and only then for the first time experienced a setback. His flight was pathetic and frantic.

That was it for him. He had nowhere to run. After fleeing pathetically for an hour, Alexander was forced to circle back to the ravine. He was cornered. Five of us had been able to join the pursuit. The moment Alec ran, Zanoba collapsed and Dohga slumped where he stood. There were still five of us, though: Sandor and Atofe, Eris and Ruijerd, and me.

I could see the ravine. We weren’t at a narrow point you could jump across, but at a precipitous cliff at least three hundred meters to the other side.

There was nowhere to run, and we had all the strength we needed.

“Damnit...”

Was he backed into a corner? Was this an act? Alexander came to a stop at the edge of the cliff, breathing heavily. He looked like he was at his limit, but we couldn’t let our guard down. He’d lost one arm, but he’d started off wielding the King-Dragon Sword one-handed. When he had the King-Dragon Sword with its gravity manipulation powers, one hand wasn’t the disadvantage we needed for decisive victory. He might be hiding something up his sleeve.

I was one to talk, after getting my own arm cut off.

Alexander’s face looked frozen by fear. Still, he was the North God, so I couldn’t let my guard down.

“Come now, give it up. You can’t do it. You can’t get out of this.”

If Sandor was saying that...did that mean he really didn't have a way to turn this around?

"That's right! Now accept your death quietly!"

"Mother, I'm talking to Alec right now, so be quiet a minute, okay?"

"Hrmm...oh..."

She shut up at a word from Sandor. *Atofe* did what he said. Watching them, I was reminded again that these guys were family. Even if there was zero resemblance.

"Ahem... When you got your arm cut off after keeping your power in reserve to fight Orsted, you lost. I told you long ago to never, ever underestimate your opponent."

He was defeated. He held back, and that was a mistake he couldn't recover from. It happens a lot, y'know. Especially when you underestimate someone.

"Throw down your sword and surrender yourself. As your father, I will see you don't come to harm."

Kind words from Sandor. *As your father*. These past few years, I'd gotten weak to those words. Really, I couldn't let it slide that this guy had attempted to slaughter all the Superd. He wasn't a direct disciple to the Man-God, more like a disciple of Geese's, and it was only *attempted* slaughter... *If little Alec gives a tearful apology, then I guess...* Though, hm. Even then...

He looked young. Just like Paul had been young. I didn't know his actual age, but he had to be far younger than Paul was when I was born.

You could even call him a child.

Maybe...maybe if he applied himself to learn to be better from now on...

Then it hit me. Was a child like that going to quietly listen to someone talking down to him?

"I won't!"

Yeah, thought not.

“I didn’t even fight with my full strength! The thing with my left hand was just luck! If the Ogre God hadn’t run, this would never have happened!”

“That’s why you lost.”

“What, so I shouldn’t rely on my allies?! You’re one to talk, fighting in a group like that!”

“A hero does not blame his allies. Your allies will aid you in your time of need, but even if you should lose their aid along the way, you win anyway,” Sandor said decisively, as though this were the only correct answer.

It was a strangely persuasive argument, perhaps because of that tone. I wasn’t up on the details of the kind of heroic legend he’d made for himself...but clearly, this man was a legend.

“That wasn’t the only reason you lost. Your strategy was flawed. You should have fought us with your full power and then retreated temporarily to fight again once you recovered.”

“As if chances to fight Orsted just show up every day!”

“Who told you that?”

Alec was struck silent with a look that said Sandor was right on the mark. It had to have been Geese. The Man-God couldn’t see Orsted, and Orsted had been widely believed to be missing for a long time. It was only because of who I was that I knew any old adventurer could go to Sharia if they wanted to see him. Maybe it was inevitable Alec would think he could only find him here, that this was his only chance to fight him. He was still so young. His claims to want to be a hero and his desire to surpass his father? I bet those stemmed from his youth, too.

There was no next time. He had to grab every chance that came before him. Of course he’d think like that. He was a bit aggressive with it, but I understood his mindset. Or at least, I assumed I did.

“You ought to have found some like-minded friends—or rivals—your own age.”

“Shut up!” Alec yelled, disgusted with Sandor’s pity. He raised his sword. Eris and the others raised their own swords, and I readied myself to

cast more offensive spells.

Five against one. There was no hope he could win. Yet—

“No! I haven’t lost, not yet! Now, now’s when a hero turns the battle around! I’ll take you all down! Kill all the Superd! Then Orsted! I’ll kill the Dragon God and become a hero!”

The instant I saw some aura emitting from his sword, I raised my left hand.

“Arm, absorb.”

Gravity distorted, but only briefly. For a moment, I felt weightless, like when an elevator starts to move, but then I felt myself sucked back to the ground.

“Raaaaaa!” Next second, Alec swung his sword. All five of us, including me, scattered, leaping back.

Alec wasn’t aiming at any of us.

“Gah!”

His target was the ground. He struck the earth with the greatblade and broke it. An eruption of dust filled my vision for a second. *Is he going to attack from behind the smokescreen?* I wondered, bracing myself. Then, the Eye of Distant Sight caught a gap in the dust.

I saw Alexander falling backward, into the ravine...

No way, did he self-KO? Did he push himself into the ravine with his own attack...?

That wasn’t it. There was a smile on Alec’s face. A nasty smile. A victorious smile.



Oh...right.

Alec had fallen off the bridge, but he'd be back. The King Dragon Blade's power was gravity manipulation. Even if he fell all the way to the bottom of the ravine, he'd have no trouble getting back up.

The next second, I jumped.

I jumped after Alec, into the ravine.

Chapter 7: Alexander vs. Rudeus

AS I FELL, I kept my vision trained on Alexander with the Eye of Distant Sight. As soon as I started to fall, I saw that Alec had noticed me. He was shocked. The gap between us narrowed rapidly. He was using the King Dragon Blade to control the speed of his descent. First things first: I removed that advantage.

“Arm, absorb!”

Alec’s rate of descent sped up to normal. The law of inertia still held, though. Now that I was in motion, I couldn’t stop in a hurry.

Could I slow my descent with wind magic...? No, I need to use gravity. I can’t wrap myself in a battle aura. Physics, don’t fail me now.

I used a sonic wave to adjust my positioning while accelerating, angling my descent straight at Alec.

“Whooooooa!”

Without changing our relative velocities, I barreled into Alec with my fist.

He used his sword as a shield to take the blow, but that didn’t kill the momentum. He smashed into the cliff face, while I kept spamming the Stone of Absorption. The counterforce sent me toward the cliff face too, but I used Sonic Wave to right myself, then kicked off from the wall and accelerated.

Once again, I went after Alec.

“Graaah!”

Punch!

Using another sonic wave to pick up speed, I threw a punch. I generated relative velocity between us, and threw another punch, and another.

The laws of physics were my weapon.

“Aaaahhh!” Alec yelled. He’d lost all sense of what was going on, getting the crap beaten out of him in midair. Hell, *I* didn’t know what was going on. I was supposed to be on support. How I’d ended up like this, I had absolutely no clue. I only knew I couldn’t let him get away. I thought if I left this kid to his own devices, waiting for him to grow a conscience or a brain, it was going to go badly for someone. That someone would be on our side of the fight. My allies, or my family, or someone. I had to stop him.

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhh!” I screamed back.

It’s not that I wasn’t listening to Sandor and Alec’s conversation. It’s not that I didn’t think that he could grow if he reflected on his actions. I wasn’t weighing up the pros and cons. I just punched him. Accelerate, then punch, accelerate, accelerate, then punch and punch...

Alec and I both slammed into the ravine floor at terrifying speed.

I stood up in a cloud of dust. The impact of our fall had sent blue spore-like things flying around us. Visibility was poor.

First things first: I wasn’t hurt. Gotta hand it to the Magic Armor Version One, it was one sturdy piece of tech. There was a little crack in it, but it was still totally functional.

“Phew...”

Alec made it out in one piece as well, but at least he wasn’t totally unscathed. His armor was broken and one of his legs was bent at an unnatural angle.

That was all. I guess his battle aura protected him. He stood up on one leg, looking at me. He showed no sign of being in pain. What a beast.

“...You came after me alone,” he muttered. “You’ve got guts.”

I looked up. I could see the Earth Dragons crawling around in the darkness, but there was no sign of anyone coming down. Surely Atofe at least would be down soon. I mean, she could fly...

“My grandma’s old-fashioned. I fell, and you followed. She won’t let anyone come after us.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“She’s always had a thing for single combat between the demon king and the champion.”

Okay, I knew a bit about that. Atofe was chaotic, but she did have some weird hang-ups. I mean, she didn’t attack her own personal guard when she fought, for one thing.

“This is a stroke of luck for me.”

“...What is?”

“I’m injured. If Eris Greyrat or Ruijerd Superdia...or Dad or Grandma had come after me, I’d have been finished.”

“Because it’s me, you’re not?”

“I don’t see myself losing to you.”

He was confident.

Alec was badly hurt. He’d lost an arm and a leg. I was wearing the Magic Armor. After a long fight, I’d used a lot of magic, but because I’d been focusing on supporting the others, I didn’t have any injuries to speak of. I was in peak condition.

“Don’t you think you’re underestimating me?”

“No, I don’t. You don’t have any battle aura, your reactions are slow, and you’re wide open to attack. You didn’t even notice when I gave sleeping drugs to North Emperor Dohga, let yourself be led by your enemies, and got thrown into the ravine. You don’t have enough resolve or caution. You’re a useless incompetent.”

I didn’t have any comeback for that. I was everything he said. Even with all this magic bursting out of me, I was still useless.

If Atofe hadn’t shown up a few minutes ago, I’d have been screwed.

“So, even if we fight now, I’ll win, and I can get away. If I get away, I’ve as good as won.”

“You know even if you beat me you don’t have any allies, right? The Ogre God ran, and the Sword God’s dead... Pretty sure even with me gone, you’ve got no chance of winning.”

Okay, I hadn’t confirmed that the Sword God was dead. I mean, he had to be. This was Eris we were talking about.

“No, a *hero* can win. Heroes are made that way. Just now, you couldn’t finish me off while we fell. I couldn’t move and could only take your attacks, and even then, you couldn’t finish me off.”

He said this like it answered everything. He was so confident. Of course, he *was* standing here on the ground on his own leg.

“I will win. I’ll win against you, and Dad, and Grandma, and Orsted. I’ll defeat you all and put my name down in history as the greatest swordsman who ever lived. Then North God Kalman will come to mean none other than Alexander III. Then everyone will think of *me* as the strongest in all of history.”

He was battered and bruised all over, but he was no longer in a state where he had to just take my attacks. This was his chance to win. He could sense it.

His exact probability of success was unclear, but he thought he could pull this off. Here, in this critical battle, he believed he could beat me.

Was it because he wanted to be a hero? No, that wasn’t it. It was because he’d made it this far overcoming danger like this. He knew he’d been backed into a corner. For sure, he was underestimating me a bit, but he wasn’t going to hold back any longer. He planned on crushing me with all his power, then escaping.

My opponent was the Third North God Kalman. One of the Seven Great Powers, with sword-fighting skills and a magic sword that both classed among the world’s strongest. He wasn’t a rat in a corner. He was a wounded tiger.

Meanwhile, I didn’t have much I could bring to this critical battle.

Either I used careful planning and crushed him, or I lost because I couldn’t overcome the difference in our power. Those were the only

options. He'd guessed that. After all of his fighting experience, he could tell that I wasn't the type who could swing things my way.

Either that, or he'd heard it from Geese, or the Man-God...

"...I have one last question. Are you a disciple of the Man-God?"

"No, I'm not. The Sword God and I got information from Geese, that's all. I admit to helping him, though."

"Right."

Who was the last one, then? No, never mind. I could think about that later. Here and now, I had to take this guy down.

Huh? Hold the phone. If it looks like a lost cause, I can just run, can't I?

I had allies. I didn't have to go all out here. If there was someone else other than Alexander remaining, wasn't I better off keeping my power in reserve?

The Sword God was down, and we hadn't taken any casualties. In which case, wasn't the smart option to back down and create an environment where we could reliably win?

"...No."

Never mind. That wasn't going to work. Orsted lay beyond me. If I let anyone pass, we'd lose. Letting one or two people past wouldn't cause any earth-shattering disasters at first. All that would happen was that Orsted would use up more of his precious magic, the magic that he had just enough of to *maybe* last him eighty years.

I'd let myself relax too much. Since just after the battle began, I'd relaxed. The Sword God was defeated, and the Ogre God had withdrawn. The North God stood before me battered and bruised all over and ready to collapse. Even if I let the North God escape now, my allies were still ready to fight. Even if he got through them, Orsted had power to spare. He'd be used to taking out North God Kalman III. He'd be able to fight and protect the Superd at the same time.

In the face of that situation, I'd relaxed. I'd started thinking it was okay if I lost, that I had fallback options.

This was it. This was why Alec said he wouldn't lose to me.

Thinking back, I'd always been like this. I'd get to this point, then take a step back to leave a safety margin, only to fall a step short at the crucial moment. Alec could smell that on me.

Surge, momentum, luck, flow. Those I had. Admittedly, I didn't really believe in that sort of abstract stuff...but I couldn't deny that when it was there, it was there. If I retreated here or lost, Alec would gain something, and I would lose something. Something I couldn't put into words, something beyond my expectations.

So I couldn't lose. I had to win, here and now, and I had to stand my ground. In this scene, I had to shoulder the risk and go for the win.

This was it. This was a crossroads. This was where I saw if I could muster all my power and get serious.

“...I am Rudeus ‘Quagmire’ Greyrat, follower of the Dragon God,” I said.

Alec's eyes widened, and then he said, “I am Alexander Kalman Rybak, the North God!”

I'd made up my mind.

“Aaaaaggghhh!” I yelled, drawing my voice from the pit of my stomach.

“Gwaaaarghhh!” Alec's voice joined mine as he raised his sword.

His right hand aloft, a sword hilt clenched in his fingers. His left... Well, he didn't have a left hand, so let's just leave it at that.

He stepped forward with his right foot, planting his broken left leg firmly on the ground.

I ran at him. I had no plan. My instincts told me distance attacks were a bad idea. I faced Alec, lowered my stance, and ran. A split second beforehand, something flashed across my mind. It was a memory of Eris.

Right away, I raised the Gatling gun on my right arm and blasted off a full-power Stone Cannon.

Alec watched me charge forward, took a step toward me, then saw the barrage of Stone Cannons bearing down on him like rain. For a scant

half-moment, he drew his right foot back in hesitation. The Stone Cannons disappeared, one after another, dissolving into dust before Alec's eyes by the power of the Stone of Absorption. I immediately leaned left. I knew I was within reach of Alec's sword. Still, I went straight in. My right hand was extended, so I pulled it back to shoot from the hip. I leaned forward so far, my chest almost skimmed the ground.

I aimed a kick at Alec's left side.

“Gr...raaaaah!”

Alec's shoulder moved. There was a flash of silver—I felt an impact on my right shoulder as part of the Magic Armor popped off. Miraculously, he hadn't cut through my arm. Once I knew that, I didn't bother checking anything more about the extent of the damage. I just planted my foot on the ground and raised my fist—

Alec's legs flex.

He was going to jump, to evade. As I thought it, I concentrated magic in my left hand. I stopped supplying magic to the Stone of Absorption and put it into another spell. I hadn't decided which one yet. Determined only to stop him from jumping, I concentrated magic in my left hand and went for Alec's leg—

“Wha?!”

For a second, Alec's leg floated in midair.

“Aaaahhh!” I yelled, raising my right fist with the Gatling gun attached. I swung through with everything I had. My fist made contact with a *thud*. Alec hit the cliff.

“*Shoot him to pieces!*” I put as much magic as I could into the Gatling gun. Stone Cannons pounded the cliff like a power drill, and a crack opened. Even then, I didn't let up. I drew up even more magic and fired off even stronger projectiles like a machine gun.

I felt a weird sensation in my right hand. Before I could even register what that meant, a crack opened in the Gatling gun, and it fell to pieces.

“Aaaaaah!” Still, I didn't stop the flow of magic to my right hand. I generated Stone Cannons—it was the spell I'd used the most and was most familiar with. I fired. I fired, and fired, and fired.

“Ahh...ah...hah...” My yell died away into a sigh that gasped into an exhausted pant. I kept firing.

“Hah...hah...”

Then, I moved away. The right arm of the Magic Armor, now buried deep in the wall, had come off clean from the root. From the root... It must have been that hit I took from Alec before. If it weren’t for the Atofe Hand, my whole right arm might have been chopped off.

Inside the rock face, I saw flesh. Blood trickled from between the wall and the fist of the magic armor. The flesh didn’t move at all. I looked closer and saw the sword on the ground—the sword Alec had just been holding. Kajakut, the King Dragon Sword. I picked it up with my left hand. The greatblade was almost two meters long. Holding it, I returned my gaze to the rock face.

Blood kept flowing, rich and red, from the gap where the fist of the magic armor was buried in the wall. Nothing moved. In the silence, the blood continued to flow. Looking up, I could tell there were a ton of Earth Dragons lurking around, but the air here was unnaturally silent.

I could still feel it in my hand. The sword. That sensation that told me he was dead, for sure.

“I did it.” The words slipped out unconsciously. How had I managed to win? It had been dangerously close. If I’d waited another second to step forward, or if Alec hadn’t hesitated, then his strike would have cut me and the Magic Armor clean in two. Moving like Eris had worked. It was like—I’d gone hard on the attack, but without any pattern, so the timing had been unpredictable. Through the feint with the Stone Cannon, then taking an extra step—a half step, even—further than usual, I’d managed to throw off his timing. That was how Eris attacked.

Eris only used this kind of high-risk move when she knew it’d work. That was *why* she won. Even with blood pouring out of her neck, she’d still be standing at the end.

I couldn’t move like Eris. I had no way of knowing this would work. I definitely hadn’t fought on her level. If Alec hadn’t lost the use of his arm, or his leg, or if he’d seen me as a real threat, it wouldn’t have ended like this.

Then there was that sensation at the end of making Alec's leg hover. It didn't feel like any magic I'd used before. Was it possible that I'd manipulated gravity...? No, Alec had been *trying* to manipulate gravity with the King Dragon Blade and when I stopped powering the Stone of Absorption, it had probably just activated when he hadn't expected it. I'd never know for sure now. In the end, it might just have been luck, but somehow...I doubted it.

"I won." I clenched my fist tight and raised it high.

Using the Version One to keep the Earth Dragons at bay, I climbed back out of the ravine. When I got to the top, there were people waiting to greet me. It was the guys from the hunting party. With the bridge and their three god-tier fighters gone, they were milling around unsure of what to do. When they saw me, they scattered, running off like baby spiders. They must have thought I was a devil or something.

First off, I caught a few of the commanding officers—guys who looked like Biheiril Kingdom Knights—and told them the Sword God and the North God were dead. Then I told them that if they kept on trying to attack the Superd, I was prepared to strike back. However, I told them that like before, I was prepared to enter into peace negotiations. My conditions for peace were what they'd been last time. I was pissed that they'd attacked, but if Geese were masquerading as the king, or someone close to him, that meant this was the Man-God's work. I wasn't about to alter my lenient stance. Still, I took the two of them as prisoners of war to be on the safe side. If Geese had disguised himself as the king, it might not mean much. It wasn't like all the knights were Geese's henchmen, and he wouldn't have everyone with power in this country under his control. When word got around about what had happened and the knights made it home safely, public opinion would be on our side. If all else failed, I'd have to get the Superd to move...that would buy us some time.

With that thought, I turned to go home, and my eyes fell on the stone monument. The monument to the Seven Great Powers. On its edge, the mark right at the bottom had changed to one I recognized.

It was a mark in the shape of three crossed spears—the shape of the Migurd talisman. Did that mean I'd become one of the Seven Great Powers? I was the one who'd finished him off, sure, but I couldn't make myself believe it. All four of us had fought him, after all. Maybe it wasn't my mark. Maybe it was Ruijerd, or Eris... Okay, I didn't think it was Eris.

Honestly, it didn't feel great. Like, now I was this thing. So what? Did I ask for that? I couldn't undo it now.

I headed for where Eris and the others were.

After that, I crossed the village and met up with Eris and the others.

Sandor spoke first. "What...happened?" When I told him that I'd finished off Alec at the bottom of the ravine, he smiled sadly and said, "I see."

"You are a champion!" Atofe declared. "When a demon king underestimates a champion, they lose. That's how it has been since ancient times." Her expression wasn't much different from before. Maybe she *was* a tiny bit sad, though. Sentimental speech wasn't like her...

Alec was dead. He was only a kid. He'd been talented and thought about nothing but being the best... He'd had a future.

I'd had a few thoughts while Alec and Sandor were talking. Like how I wanted Alec to think things over for a bit longer. How we'd teach him a lesson now, get him to think about his actions. It was naive, I won't deny it. I didn't hate him or want him dead. I just killed him because he was my enemy. I killed him because I thought if I let him get away, I'd regret it. I had to do it.

So I wasn't about to apologize. This was war. The other side was trying to kill us. That was the nature of the game.

"You did it!" Eris, in contrast, looked delighted. When I told her that the mark on the tablet had changed, she folded her arms with a smirk and exhaled roughly through her nose. She might have thrown herself at me if I

hadn't been wearing the Magic Armor. She'd have been so squishy. *Oh, what might have been!*

Ruijerd didn't say much, but the exhaustion was plain on his face. Just as I'd thought during the battle, he must have been close to his limit. That was a hard battle to fight after just recovering from illness. Still, we'd won, and without anyone sustaining any injuries worth mentioning.

That said, what about everything else?

We decided to make haste back to the Superd Village. We passed the charred spot where Eris burned the Sword God's body, the crater the North God had made when he attacked, and the trees knocked down in the fight with the Ogre God. It was like an animal's trail through the woods.

Following those tracks, we made our way back to the road we'd originally taken from the village. There, Zanoba lay collapsed. Beside him crouched Dohga, his face slack. Zanoba looked like he was asleep. He was lying on his back, and his face was gray.

Like...a dead person?

“...Zanoba, wake up. It's over,” I called down from the Magic Armor. He didn't respond.

“Zanoba...?”

For a few seconds, all sound disappeared from the forest. The wind ceased and all noise stopped.

“Z-Zanoba? You're kidding, right?”

He didn't reply.

“Say something...” Still, Zanoba did not reply. He lay there with his face pointed up at the sky, silent as if he were a corpse.

As if he were a corpse.

“...Hmph!” Suddenly, Eris kicked Zanoba in the face.

“Swuh-huhhh?!”

“We're going home! Get your butt up!”

“Ah...? Oh! How rude of me! I must have dozed off.”

Oh, of course.

Still, he could just as easily have been dead. Zanoba and Dohga had been at a disadvantage. If they hadn't happened to run into us, Zanoba could have ended up as a lifeless corpse.

With that thought, I looked down the path Zanoba and Dohga had come flying from. Scars from the battle visibly split the scenery here and there; there were pulled-up trees, trees snapped in half, sword marks, and a bunch of little craters.

Man, we were lucky to win. Come to think of it, we didn't even beat the Ogre God. He went home.

“By the way, Lady Atofe, how did you get here?”

“Eh? You want to know?”

“Please, tell me.”

“Well, you see—”

Atofe's rambling explanation was hard to follow. She used so many sound effects that I think I only got about half of it.

“Let me get this straight...there's a teleportation circle left over from a past Great War, and you used that.”

“I went and found it so I'd have it when the time came!”

Awkward. The infamous Atofe was using the teleportation circles—the same teleportation circles I was running around everywhere to set up. If people knew, they might start thinking of *me* as infamous.

Well, maybe that ship had sailed.

Seriously though, was it really over...? I *had* thought this was a chance for victory, but it had all happened in an instant. I wasn't sure what the Ogre God was up to, but now few of our enemies remained.

When I thought it was over, I suddenly caught a whiff of something sweet from Eris, who walked beside me. I guess it was the effect of a hard-fought battle. My survival instincts were all worked up, and maybe that had kicked my reproductive instincts into gear.

What about tonight, then? Wasn't I Rudeus the Free now?

“No, no.”

I was Rudeus the Chaste until I beat Geese. That's right. I still hadn't worked out what form Geese was taking. The Ogre God had only fled. Who knew what would happen?

There was one disciple left. This *wasn't* over.

Geese still hadn't revealed himself. Our information network was now a hot mess, so we couldn't search for him properly. We wouldn't even know if he'd run.

...What if that was his plan all along? Maybe I was the only one who thought this was the final battle, that we'd decide things here. Did Geese plan on slipping away from the start? Right now, was he making for the border with the other disciple in tow...? All my sources of information, previously spread throughout the country, were now lumped together in the Superd Village for the battle. We had neither teleportation circles nor contact tablets. Even if Geese was discovered at the border, we had no way of going after him.

Yeah, he'd probably run. After the Abyssal King died, the Sword God and the North God went rogue, and he ended up in a disadvantaged position...

Using eighty percent of his forces as a distraction, he secured the guys he knew he could control, lured us in, then used the time to escape. He'd given up for now so he could try again next time...

That's what I'd do if it were me.

"Phew..."

I still couldn't relax, even though the immediate fighting was over. I was wrecked. I couldn't fight any more today. Some other chump could deal with the rest.

I hadn't been able to finish Geese off, but we'd taken down the Abyssal King, the Sword God, and the North God. Ruijerd and the Superd were on our side. The Biheiril Kingdom and the Ogre God would depend on what Geese did...but we'd have to see how negotiations went.

I supposed that the only real damage we'd taken was the destruction of the office... Thanks to that, the teleportation circles were all kaput. We

couldn't move around for a while, but we'd made progress. This wasn't a bad outcome, all things considered. I'd expected a lot worse.

As I was thinking this, the Superd Village came into view. I could see the Superd children, who must have sensed our presence, watching from the top of the fence. Then, the warriors protecting the village came out from the entrance. After them came Elinalise, Cliff, Norn, Julie, and Ginger... From their faces, they seemed fine. I got out of the Magic Armor. I'd ended up using a ton of magic, so maybe that was why my limbs felt a bit heavy. Julie and Ginger ran up to Zanoba. Norn went to Ruijerd, and Cliff headed toward Dohga, who was still slumped. Some of them embraced, some of them exchanged words of relief. Watching them, the reality of everything finally hit me.

Orsted emerged then, at long last. He walked up to me.

“You won?”

“Yes.”

As proof of our victory, I held out the sword to him. The King Dragon Sword Kajakut, the symbol of the North God.

“We won.”

Victory was ours. Total victory was still a way off, but we'd made it through a dicey situation. We'd broken out of Geese's trap, which put us one move ahead.

I had all sorts of things to think about, and no end of things I could have done better.

Still, a win was a win.

Orsted took the sword and said, “Good work.” I bowed my head. Then, I felt someone's gaze from beside me. It was Eris. She had her arms folded, and she was looking at me.

She spread her arms.

“...We did it!” she cried, then threw herself on me. As I enjoyed the feeling of her breasts, I thought again, *I won.*

Chapter 8: Rest

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since the battle. The wounded were healed, and peace had returned to the Superd Village. During those three days, we'd rested but also stayed on guard against any further enemies. We weren't doing *nothing*, but nothing notable happened.

Those were truly peaceful, uneventful days. Zanoba was so worn out that he slept more than half the time. I was worried he'd been badly wounded, but the doctors said it was just ordinary muscle pain. He said it was the first muscle pain he'd experienced in his life and went on reciting his would-be last words: "It feels like my body's going to fall apart... Julie, I'm going to die soon, I've taught you all I can. Stay strong when I am gone."

Julie wept but nodded with determination in her eyes. It was kinda funny.

I even found myself running over, gripping his hand, and saying, "Zanoba, I'll complete the autonomous doll, I promise. I swear to god! Leave it to me. *Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again. Healing.*"

After that, Zanoba stood up, looking miraculously healthy, and got to work on repairing the Version One. Julie gaped—poor thing.

Once in the village, Atofe was relatively subdued. Before I knew it, she'd had the villagers build her a wooden throne and was initiating the warriors into the ways of battle. It wasn't anything serious. Even Eris joined in.

Sandor seemed a bit embarrassed at Atofe's antics, but every now and then, a shadow fell across his face. Of course, he'd be thinking about Alec. I'd asked him if I ought to give him back the King Dragon Blade, but he dismissed it as a tool of war and told me to do with it as I wished.

Well, after talk like that, I didn't exactly feel like just picking it up. I was one to talk, totally dependent on the Magic Armor as I was, but I felt

like using this sword too much would be bad for me—besides, I wasn't a swordsman. I'd struggle to wield it effectively. I had Orsted look after it for the time being. I could lend it out to people when I needed to.

Ruijerd spent all day every day with Norn. Or more like, everywhere Ruijerd went, Norn followed him like a duckling. Seeing Ruijerd teaching her all sorts of things reminded me of Eris and me, back in the day.

Norn was a diligent student.

...I could call this diligence, right? I just didn't think I'd ever seen a look like that on Norn's face before. It was like how she looked at people she admired, but not quite the same... I mean, not that it mattered. She could look at him how she liked.

Dohga was a big hit with the women and children. When we'd first arrived in the village, they'd feared him, but they seemed to have gotten over that barrier. I guessed it was because of how he'd devoted himself to helping them during the plague.

Lately, he'd been whittling things like wooden dolls and playing with the kids. He looked the picture of innocence the whole time.

The kids had stopped pelting Orsted with balls, so he seemed a little lonely. The medical team said the Superd were progressing well, so they moved on to researching the plague. They went through the village's food, looking for a cause...well, it was more like they were collecting samples. They'd probably take them back to the Asura Kingdom and store them for reference.

Cliff, Elinalise, and Ginger set off for the Second City of Irelil at my request. They were going to repeat my demands to the king as a condition for the release of our prisoners.

I needed someone who could receive the king's response. I sent two Superd warriors, both with shaven heads, along to serve as their guards... but if Geese hadn't called off his plan, he might try to pick us off one by one. I couldn't relax.

I held a review meeting after the battle. There was no end of things to go over. In particular, the bit where I'd gotten myself thrown into the ravine was like, yowzers. And why had I thought Geese wouldn't use Magical Implements? I'd have to be ready for that likelihood next time. Getting

surprised the first time a trick was pulled on me was human, but that trick wouldn't work on me again.

Oh yeah, the Atofe Hand went back to Atofe, and a healing magic scroll returned my right arm to its original form. Without thinking, I reached out with my new hand and gave Eris's breasts a good squeeze. She got a good uppercut in, right on my chin, and there was half a day wasted.

Then there was that spell. The spell I'd used at the end of my fight with Alec. I thought it was probably gravity magic, but I wanted another clue. That fight had driven home to me just how powerful gravity magic was.

I had a lot to consider with the teleportation circles too. If I went on setting them up all over the place like this time, our opponent would use them too. I'd have to take precautions against that in future.

Even after three days passed, the teleportation circles still hadn't recovered. On the second day, I called Arumanfi, and he told me my family were all safe...but even so, the recovery of the magic circles was slower than I'd anticipated.

Maybe there was a problem with something unrelated to the Man-God. That was concerning. Worrying too much wouldn't help, though, so I had to occupy myself by doing what I could.

On the fourth day, Eris and I went on a date... Okay, we went on a walk around the village. Eris had—unusually for her—spent the whole day after the battle sleeping like a log. At least, recently it was unusual. Her lifestyle these days was regimented to a degree unimaginable when she was little. I hardly ever even saw her take a nap. Once she'd joined in when Linia took a nap, but that was about it. I thought about lying down with them that time, but when Linia was there too that'd mean sharing a bed with her. It felt like a form of cheating, so after some genuine agonizing, I'd decided against it.

Anyway. When Eris was a kid, she'd napped in the stable all the time. Back then, she'd run with her engine open at full throttle 24/7, but she was still small and not done growing yet, so she ran her tank dry. Now, she had a tank with many times the capacity of those days, with a cutting-edge eco-

friendly engine. She didn't run dry anymore. And yet, she'd slept for a full day. That was just how intense the battle had been.

When Eris woke up, she was her old self. She caught sight of the Superd kids as we walked around the village and exclaimed excitedly, "They've really got tails!" She actually got one to let her touch it. Her target was a girl. If I'd tried it the Superd, who were protective of their children, would have carried me off and flogged me. *I'm not a perv! Don't arrest me!*

Sylphie was probably pretty done with my kinky crap, but if I were going to go there, I'd want *her* in a costume with a tail.

Anyway, maybe it was seeing Ruijerd again after so long, or maybe she'd loosened up with the fighting over for now, but Eris was so excited it was like she was a kid again. However, as we were going around the village, she suddenly stopped. Sensing danger, I stopped too. She was staring at someone, a middle-aged man who, without his helmet, gave a somewhat childish impression. It was Sandor von Grandeur, the cover name of Alex Rybak, North God Kalman II.

I saw Eris's pupils contract.

"Hey, don't—" By the time I tried to restrain her it was already too late. Eris dived forward with incredible speed and struck fiercely at Sandor with her sword.

"Ah!"

But Sandor was quick too. He spun around and caught her blow at the hilt. That was when I finally caught up. I grabbed Eris around the waist, apologizing to Sandor.

"Eris! Whatever Sandor's done, back down—for my sake! Sandor, I'm sorry, I don't know what came over my husband—I mean my wife!"

"Where do you think you're sticking your face?" She kicked me. Okay, maybe I *did* press my face into her butt, but that was out of my control!

"I'm sorry, Eris, but you can't go around picking fights with people. Especially Sandor, when he just fought alongside us! Like yeah, concealing his identity and putting on stupid airs and talking like a cryptic sellsword got on my nerves, too. But that's no reason to hit someone!"

“I know that,” Eris said.

Liar. If you knew that you wouldn’t be attacking people from behind with a sword, would you? I know a thing or two myself.

“Eris, you know, I’ve been seeing you differently lately. I thought you seemed calmer than you used to be. You’ve grown up, gotten more patient, you even learned how to teach sword fighting to other people. Norn was grateful to you for teaching her. It’s not easy winning people’s gratitude like that, you know! I see it as proof of the training you did at the Sword Sanctum. Looking at you now, I never could have imagined you’d grow up into such a wonderful person.”

I was getting a bit preachy, but it was important. Whatever had ruffled her feathers, she couldn’t attack people from behind out of the blue. When Eris swung her sword, it was on a different level from ordinary violence.

“R-really? But Rudeus...” Eris looked happy, but also a bit disappointed. I had to convince her.

“Ah well, Master Rudeus.” Sandor pulled the brake on me. “Let’s leave it at that. I expect Miss Eris wanted to see if the legend was true.”

“The...legend?”

“They say you can’t catch the Second North God Kalman by surprise. Combat ready at all times, even if you attack from behind, he turns like he has eyes in the back of his head and does away with the threat before it strikes.” With that, Sandor struck a pose like he was cutting away an arrow fired at his back. Ignoring his puffery, I had heard something like that before. It showed up in the middle section of *The Epic of the North God*. That’s right, I think it was the bit where, after the world starts to take notice of the Second North God Kalman, the monarch of the King Dragon Realm sends a bunch of assassins to eliminate him, and he kills them all?

“...I did want to see if it was true.”

“Master Rudeus, Miss Eris was properly considerate. When I caught her strike, I understood that she planned to stop at the last second.”

“Oh, right. In that case... But Eris, if you’re going to do something like this, say something to me. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

“If I’d said something, he’d have noticed.”

Really, though...? Well, I guess if you planned on stopping at the last second, it was just a game, so that’s fine?

What if Sandor had gotten mad and gone over to Geese’s side...?

Hmm. Maybe I was overthinking this. Joshing around between sword fighters always looked deadly to me.

“So you really can block attacks even when they come from behind?”

“Oh, well, I couldn’t back then. That bit in the epic was just my ally having my back. Only, when I started taking apprentices, they all wanted to see if it was true. So I picked it up naturally keeping them at bay.”

“So that’s it!” Eris said. She sounded moved by Sandor’s words. To be fair, when you hear that kind of inside story, it does kind of make you feel like you heard something amazing.

Even when the story itself is no big deal.

“Now, what would you say to a bout?” Sandor asked.

“For real?!”

“I would be honored to try my skill against the fighter who defeated Gall Falion.” Sandor’s eyes flicked over to me as he spoke, and he winked.

What’s that about... Oh, I see. This is a bit of fan service, huh? The Second North God Kalman, hero of the Epic of the North God. He was a big deal. He probably ran into people like Eris a lot.

Maybe he was giving her a special perk because she was my wife? At least, that’s what I thought. Yet Sandor’s eyes stayed on me.

“You know I’m not joining in, yeah? Eris would rather do one-on-one too. Right?”

Stop looking at me and give your fangirl some attention.

Eris might be a little grumpy after losing, but if he framed it as a teaching experience, she’d be happy to take the lesson on board. She was obedient to people who were stronger than her, that girl.

“Oh no,” Sandor said. “I just have a request, in exchange for the bout.”

“No problem! Right, Rudeus?” Eris said.

Could she at least wait until *after* he told us what he wanted?

“I don’t know if you’ll be able to grant it. It’s rather difficult, you see...”

“...Difficult, you say?”

Starting off like that is way off-putting. I mean, something the Second North God Kalman straight-up says is difficult?

I wasn’t sure that was within my power... But hey, I’d tried hard for the past twenty-odd years to get this far. Even if I couldn’t do it, I was sure I could help somehow.

“I think for you two, it just might be possible.”

“You’ll have to tell me what it is.”

“Let’s call it a surprise for when the fight’s over.”

You always do this.

Whatever.

“Depending on what it is, I’ll see what I can do,” I said. If he was going to be inscrutable, I’d just have to do the same.

There was a *clang* as the wooden sword met the staff. Well, no. It was a much softer sound effect than *clang*; a weird percussive noise that didn’t sound at all like it came from the collision of a wooden sword and a staff. It was more like *swboh, gwooong, calunk calunk*. Eris threw out rapid-fire strikes at crazy speed, interspersed with feints and diversions, but every one of them got blocked. I had a lot of mock fights with Eris, so I could tell she was serious. I wasn’t sure about Sandor, but given how comfortable he looked, I didn’t think he was going all out.

Having said that, every now and then a look flashed over his face like he was struggling, which implied Eris was getting somewhere. They fought bout after bout. Nothing marked the start or the finish. They just took their

distance, then one—usually Eris—attacked, then at some point they suddenly stopped. Okay, Sandor usually had his staff at Eris's neck or her heart or some other vital point, which I guess meant he was winning.

Every three or four exchanges, Eris's sword found its mark. Whenever that happened, there was a murmured “Ooh!” from around them. At some point, their audience had grown. Cliff, Elinalise, Zanoba, Ginger, Dohga, some young Superd, and even the doctors from Asura were watching Eris and Sandor's battle, wide-eyed.

Fair enough. This is worth watching.

You wouldn't see this in a fight between Eris and *me*. It was too fast for me to see anything other than that it was incredible, but she was essentially at the rank of a Sword God; she knew the theory well enough to teach sword fighting. So she might not be on even footing with *the* Sword God, who was the best in his class, but she was only a step behind him. To Sandor, she might have some weak points, but even accounting for those, she was winning one in every three or four matches. Even from the sidelines, it was clear straight away: you were watching to see how Eris would slip through Sandor's defenses to get a hit in.

In short, it was an exciting match—even to an amateur's eyes.

“Gaaaah!”

These bouts were, at last, winding up. Eris had taken three rounds in a row from Sandor.

She let out a deep breath and sat down on the ground. “Like this, huh?”

“Just like that. You lived up to your name, Mad Sword King Eris. Your instincts are on another level.”

Despite the praise he was giving her, Eris's expression was hard. *She sure hates to lose.*

“You're adaptable. You avoid the things you've seen don't work and actively pursue the things that do. Even when the things you've seen work turn out to be false, you have the presence of mind to move on to the next thing without assuming it was simply bad luck. When defeat seems imminent you don't give up and graciously accept it. You keep hunting for a

path to victory to the last... I caught a glimpse of North God Style in your technique. Who was your master?"

"Auber."

"Oh, *him*. How ironic. Whenever he saw something wasn't working, he tried everything to find a clever way to use it. His growth was all twisted."

"His secret weapon wasn't, though."

"True. At his core, he was earnest. I'm sure he knew it. His twistedness was his strength, but he couldn't rely on it at the very end."

This was turning into a touching scene. I didn't know the details, but maybe North Emperor Auber, whom Eris had fought in the Asura Kingdom, had been Sandor's student.

"Right, now that our bout is over." Sandor clapped his hands together, and the onlookers scattered. They all looked pleased, like they'd seen something spectacular. Cliff was looking at his hands, squeezing them into fists. Maybe he was thinking sword fighting might be for him, too. Elinalise quickly wrapped her own hands around his fist to keep him in check.

Cliff, you're awesome enough as is. You don't need to go learning sword fighting.

After the clap, Sandor immediately transitioned to rubbing his hands together as he turned to me.

"Now then, Master Rudeus, Miss Eris. Returning to my most humble request of you."

All righty, what kind of request is the mighty North God going to throw at us?

Sandor's mouth was squirming. He looked uncharacteristically nervous. How to put it? It was like he wasn't sure how to proceed.

"I'd like you to introduce me once more to Master Ruijerd!"

To...Ruijerd?

"But...why?" Perhaps Sandor was into dudes. He had a kid, so I'd been sure he liked women, like your average guy... Maybe his tastes had

changed as he got older? Or maybe he'd picked up a few dodgy habits after joining the Asuran Knights. Maybe I should report this to his mom. I wanted to see how Atofe would react.

Just as I was thinking along those lines, Sandor said, "I'd appreciate it if you could ask him to talk to me. About what happened the moment they finished off Laplace and sealed him away at last."

"Um, North God Kalman I was your father, right? Didn't you ask him?"

"My father was unconscious for the final moments and didn't know the details of what happened. I once endeavored to meet with Sir Perugius and I tried to ask him, but he wouldn't answer me...and Sir Urupen met his end before I could meet him..."

Aha, that makes sense. Sandor wanted to know about the end of the Laplace War—specifically, the details of the final battle with Demon God Laplace, but he hadn't had the opportunity. He hadn't been able to ask any of the Three Godslayers—North God Kalman I, Armored Dragon King Perugius, and Dragon God Urupen—and had given up. Now, he'd been lucky enough to run into the last one, obscured by history: the man whose blow had helped to turn the tide against Laplace in that final battle, Ruijerd Superdia of Dead End.

I guess he would know.

"What do you plan to do with the answer?"

"Huh? Don't you want to know?! This is a real heroic epic we're talking about. Not like the cheap excuse for an epic they made about me. I ran around all over the world poking my nose into situations that looked like they could win me some fame until things just sort of fell into place. No, this was the finale of a battle fought by *true* heroes facing certain death against an enemy far beyond their powers but fighting anyway to save the world!"

I knew the story of *The Epic of the North God*. Who knew how much writers in this world had exaggerated? Still, his heroic epic was incredible. The particulars varied from chapter to chapter, but broadly speaking, it was the tale of how he'd traveled the world vanquishing evil and rescuing the weak. He'd saved tons of people. Whatever he thought of it, I thought it

was amazing. In contrast, Ruijerd's story was a tragedy. He hadn't done what they said about him, but his family had still been killed, and his people put in danger of extinction.

He hadn't saved anyone or achieved anything, and it was because of him that the Superd were forced to live such a restricted life. There was nothing he was proud of. I doubted he'd bring it up of his own accord. If I asked him...yeah, he might tell me, but I was sure it wasn't something he wanted to talk about.

With that, I looked over at Eris. Her eyes were sparkling.

"I want to hear about it too!" she said.

I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to know myself.

Ruijerd was in the middle of a meal. His house was very tidy. Calling it spotless would be going a bit far, but you could tell it was cleaned every day. Ruijerd wasn't the type to leave stuff lying around, but he also wasn't the type to be bothered by dust building up in corners and around the windows. Even those places were clean at this point in time.

Of course, his inexperience showed through a touch. If my little sister Aisha, who worked as a maid, saw it, she'd exclaim, "Good grief! You call this cleaning?" Okay, maybe not. If she saw such dusty windowsills, though, she'd roll her eyes with a sigh and say something like "You can't even clean?" I was pretty sure I'd seen that sort of scene play out when Linia was working for us as a maid.

Lightning round! Who's the mastermind behind this not-perfectly clean room?

Bzzt!

Ooh, getting in quick! Well, Rudeus?

She's there beside Ruijerd, serving up something that looks kind of like rice soup into bowls—Norny Greyrat!

That's right! You win a Roxy doll, Rudeus!

Yippee!

Norn was there beside Ruijerd, looking a bit taken aback to see us. I guess she was surprised to have us all troop in while they were eating. Anyway, let's not think too hard about why for now.

“What is it? Did something happen?” Ruijerd asked, looking questioningly at us.

“Mm, well, first of all—this gentleman says he’d like to properly introduce himself to you.”

I gestured my palm toward Sandor, who stood up straight.

“I am Sandor von Grandeur, formerly known as the Second North God Alex Rybak! Master Ruijerd Superdia, I can’t tell you what an honor it is to meet the legendary hero who brought about victory in the Laplace War! At your service!”

He was a bundle of nerves. Unthinkable when you compared it to his usual nonchalance. I guess that made sense. From his point of view, the warriors who made it through the Laplace War would be legends of his parent’s generation. I didn’t really get it, but presumably it was a bit like the legendary older gang members in delinquent manga who’d once achieved national domination. As the boss of a gang who rose to the top in a time of relative peace, he’d have to bow down to the great achievements of those guys.

“...On behalf of the Superd warriors, I thank you for your aid in the battle.”

Ruijerd was a polite guy. He bowed, as though it was something he’d forgotten to do earlier.

“Oh no, please raise your head!” Sandor hastened to say. Bowing to each other like that, they practically looked Japanese.

Eris, meanwhile, promptly took a seat and had Norn serve her up some of the rice soup. She was bound to be hungry after all that exercise. She started chowing down, no holds barred. It looked like she was enjoying it. Norn put a bowl in front of me, so I went with it and started to eat. It was a solid effort. Not out-of-this-world delicious, but I doubt I could do better.

Wait. Scratch that, I could do a *little* better... It was good enough to make me waffle on that point, and that was a mark of progress.

“This is great!”

“Thank you.”

“Did you make it, Norn?”

“Yes.”

Overhearing this exchange, I took another look at my soup. Would you believe it? This was *Norn*’s cooking! When had she picked up advanced cooking techniques?

Part of me thought that, anyway, but I had to acknowledge that Norn had become a grown girl. This world had homemaker training, just like back in my world. She would know how to cook, at least. Understanding how far she’d come, it suddenly tasted amazing. Little by little, Norn was growing up. It warmed a big brother’s heart to see it. Those feelings were like a spice that amplified the flavor of the soup ten, even a hundred times over. This was basically a drug.

Back on topic.

“Anyway, Ruijerd, I brought Sandor here along because he has something he’d like to ask you about.”

“He wants to ask me something?”

“Yes. Only, you might not want to talk about it.” With that out of the way, I told Ruijerd what this was all about. I told him about Sandor’s fanatical respect for him...for the whole team that brought down Laplace, and how he wanted the full picture of how that fight had gone. I also dropped in some stuff about how Sandor’s father, North God Kalman (the first one) had died in that fight, and now his son, Sandor, wanted to pin down how he had really died and, if called for, take revenge. Plus how he couldn’t even talk about his life up till now without weeping.

“Rudeus.”

“Yes?”

“Why are you telling such lies?”

“Er. I just, I got carried away...” It was common knowledge that North God Kalman had survived the battle with Demon God Laplace. Afterward, he’d infiltrated Demon King Atofe’s abode alone, cursed her, then married her. Later still, he’d journeyed around the world and finally died in the King Dragon Mountains.

“Heh. You never change, do you?”

If a sleazy guy like me had lied to the old Ruijerd, he might have gone ballistic. Now he understood I was joking. I guess he really trusted me.

“Well, maybe Sandor’s reasons for wanting to know aren’t as grand as all that, but if it’s all right with you, I hope you’ll talk to him.”

“It’s nothing special,” Ruijerd qualified. Then, he began his tale.

The curse of the spear lifted from Ruijerd, only for him to fall under another curse. The curse of vengeance. Driven on by that curse, he made haste to Laplace only to find when he arrived that the final battle had already begun. It was almost concluded when he’d gotten there.

North God Kalman was down, and Perugius’s twelve familiars had all been snuffed out save one. Perugius himself was on his knees, heavily wounded. Only Urupen fought valiantly on, but it was clear that Laplace was overpowering him. Laplace, by comparison, was tired, but he still had fight left in him. Even in the face of this, Ruijerd kept cool. Laplace had deceived the Superd and driven them nearly to extinction, but Ruijerd set aside his hatred and closely observed his opponent. Laplace was strong, but Ruijerd had some vague knowledge of the three combatants. Back when he’d been in his right mind, he’d crossed swords many times with North God Kalman and Dragon God Urupen. Both were powerful fighters. Urupen was so strong that even Ruijerd had no hope of beating him. The skyfolk woman beside Perugius looked like a fighter of some skill, too.

Despite all that, Laplace was going strong. He was tired, but he could still fight. If Ruijerd lashed out in anger, he might fail. So he observed Laplace, looking for an opening where he could be sure to end him—when he found *something* in Laplace’s body. The *something* raced around inside him. Ruijerd didn’t know what it was, but with instincts born of long

experience, he guessed that it was Laplace's weak point. There was no time to confirm his guess. Laplace attacked to finish off Perugius only for Urupen to come between them and take the blow. It would prove fatal. Victory was now hopeless. Laplace smiled triumphantly.

That moment, Ruijerd snuck up behind him and struck. His target was the *something* he had sensed. The result was sensational. Right away, Laplace was racked with pain and, in a blind rage, he hit back at Ruijerd. He didn't die at once, but something had changed.

Ruijerd could do no more. Laplace overpowered him. His Demon Eye dulled Ruijerd's movement, his fist broke through his guard to break bone, and he easily brushed off Ruijerd's attacks. Laplace shut him down, beating Ruijerd to a pulp as though he were a child. Thinking he was finished, Ruijerd threw himself at Laplace in a desperate, suicidal attack. Just then, the ground glowed. Blue-white light lit up their surroundings: it was a magic circle. Ruijerd looked and saw Urupen with both his hands on the ground, chanting something.

Laplace cried, "It can't be!" as the magic circle blazed with light. Ruijerd was blinded. Even then, his third Superd eye saw Laplace's body and mana tear apart and scatter. His ears caught Laplace's dying scream.

"Don't think that was enough to kill me! Man...! Man...! I'll kill you! I'll destroy you! Just wait, you damn bastard, I'll..."

Those were Laplace's final words.

"I don't know exactly what that technique was."

"It's called Draconic Remnant! The spell Sir Perugius revived from the ancient tomes to use against Laplace in the final battle!"

"Is that so?"

Yet another teenage edgelord name. Maybe the dragonfolk just couldn't be content unless they gave all their techniques names like that. Not that I had something against them myself.

"Well, now, so it *did* get used in the end... It was Sir Urupen who cast it... Ah, of course, it must have been setting off the spell that led to Sir Urupen's death so soon after that final battle... I'm sure the plan was for the task of setting it off to fall to Perugius... So, yes, of course, Sir Perugius

won't speak of it. He's ashamed that he let them down. Perhaps he sees himself as having murdered Sir Urupen... Yes, it's all come together...!"

Sandor was satisfied. He was muttering to himself like an otaku. That was a bit scary. It reminded me of myself in my former life. There were still some holes in my understanding after the story, but as far as I could tell this was the gist: Perugius had been supposed to use this technique in the final showdown but couldn't because Laplace knocked the crap out of him. On top of that, Urupen had taken a hit for him, then on top of *that* Urupen had activated the magic circle and passed away suddenly as a result.

That'd be unbearable. If it were me, I'd probably refuse to go outside until Roxy came and comforted me...

It made sense that he'd spent four hundred years wandering the skies, waiting for a sign of Laplace's return. I bet he'd sworn that *this* time, he'd do the deed himself.

"Huh? If you cast the final battle spell, doesn't that mean Laplace died?"

"They said they thought they'd killed him, but later, Sir Perugius searched Laplace's castle and discovered that he'd ensured that if he died, he'd be reincarnated and return. That's why he started saying that Laplace was only 'sealed.'"

"...Right."

Ruijerd's expression was stormy. He'd be thinking that when Laplace returned, he'd have to fight too. Even if Laplace would eventually come back, reincarnation meant that he was *currently* dead. They *had* killed him once.

Sorry, I shouldn't have laughed at the idea of "Three (Not-) Godslaying Heroes"...

"I don't know what happened later. After that, I said my farewells and went back to the Demon Continent."

He'd spent the last four hundred years struggling to save the Superd. Hearing the story properly, I felt like while his life *had* been hard, it was wonderful that he'd found this place to live out the rest of his days. Really wonderful.

We were also on track to restore the reputation of the Superd, so in my lifetime people would stop saying “Go to sleep or the Superd will come and gobble you up” and start saying “Go to sleep or monsters will come. Then the Superd will have to rescue you.”

Heh heh. There’d be kids refusing to go to bed everywhere.

“Thank you for telling us such a valuable story! I never thought I’d get to meet you in a place like this, you know! I’m overwhelmed! I’ve solved a lifelong mystery!”

Sandor bowed over and over again, his face glowing.

As she ate her rice soup, Eris also listened with interest. In the past she’d have butted in, bright eyed, to ask “Then?! What happened next?!” Perhaps she knew she was embroiled in a legendary fight of her own. Come to think of it, over the years Eris too had traveled to all sorts of places, had all sorts of adventures, and fought all sorts of enemies... Admittedly, for most of those she’d tagged along with me, so maybe she wasn’t fully satisfied.

“Well, that’s enough for—” Sandor had just begun to stand up.

“Well met!” someone boomed as the door was blown off its hinges. Eris jumped to her feet, kicked aside the incoming door, then used the momentum to spin around, step in, and draw her sword. She swung down to cut the intruder right down the middle.

“Hehehe, hotheaded, aren’t we... I recognize you as a champion for just that!” The intruder caught the blade between her hands. The trespasser had fully stopped Eris’s ultra-fast strike. “Settle down. I only came to meet the master of the house.”

It was Immortal Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak. Probably the most blockheaded person in the world. She was so blockheaded, she even put Eris and Kishirika to shame.

“It’s been *toooo* long, *Ruijerd Supeererdia*.” Her mouth twisted in a smile as she glowered at Ruijerd, looking every bit the demon king she was. Her voice was slippery like a snake as she spoke Demon God Tongue.

“It has, Demon King Atofe,” Ruijerd replied, also in demon tongue.

“Hehehe. I remember you well. You might not think it, but I’ve got a good memory. It was when I was chasing you around the Babynos Region, wasn’t it?”

Ruijerd was silent.

“To think you ended up building your nest in a place like *this...*”

Ruijerd was sweating. Even the great Ruijerd was uncomfortable around Atofe.

“Your Majesty, just a second, let’s all calm down. The rampage of the Superd in the Laplace war was all engineered by Laplace himself.”

“What did you say?”

I told Atofe about how the Superd had come to be cursed. Everyone cried, storyteller and listeners both, as I explained how everything was a trap set by the diabolical Laplace. The Superd were innocent.

Atofe listened, nodding like she was taking it in. Eventually, she yelled, “Shut up! You’re not making sense, so shut up!”

I must have made it too complicated. I looked at Sandor for help, and he nodded as if to say, *Leave it to me.*

“Master Rudeus... It was either just before the Superd received the magic spears (or perhaps simultaneous to that) that my mother was sealed away. She doesn’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, right... Then why were you chasing him?”

“She won’t remember the reason, I’m sure. Right, Mother?”

“Hmph... I *do* remember! It was the peasants! The peasants asked me for help!”

That stood to reason. Likely what happened was that Ruijerd had tried to help some child, some people had misinterpreted it as him attacking the child, and even though they feared the demon king, they relied on her, so they appealed to her directly. “Do something about that ‘Dead End.’”

“Well, anyway, it’s all Laplaces’s fault, so please...forgive him this time.” I almost said “let bygones be bygones” but caught myself. She’d blow her top again if I used any more difficult expressions.

“Heh, hehe, fwaahahahaha! Very well! I’m not like those stingy dragonfolk! He shall have my forgiveness!”

...

Maybe it was actually *Ruijerd* who couldn’t forgive *her*. From a certain point of view, it could look like Atofe had actively persecuted the Superd.

“But Ruijerd, the villagers here! They’re so feeble I can’t believe they’re your people. What happened to the tough Superd?”

“They all died.”

“Oh? Come to think of it, I don’t see Superd on the Demon Continent anymore.”

Ruijerd didn’t say anything. He wore a look of understanding. He’d realized logic didn’t work on Demon King Atoferatofe Rybak. She might not have even been aware that she was persecuting the Superd... By hating her, he’d just be making himself look stupid.

I mean, yeah. There was no way Atofe would plot something insidious like persecution. She was more the type to crush her opponent through head-on war.

“Hehehe. Ruijerd Superdia... I think highly of you. If you will become my servant, I shall spare your friends in the village.”

“Mother, you say ‘spare,’ but what exactly are you planning on doing if he turns you down? Surely, you aren’t saying you’re going to kill them all, right? You know no one here will stand for that?”

Sandor’s gaze was sharp. He’d curbed his air of whimsical nonchalance, and there was an icy chill in his face as he glared at her.

“Nngh...uhh...”

“I see why you want him as a servant. I grew up hearing from Dad about the strength of the Superd warriors. It makes sense you’d want to recruit the leader of those warriors...but the *way* you do it is important, Mother. Thought you might struggle with that.”

Wow, Atofe actually listened to her son.

I really was impressed. Sandor had smoothed the situation over in a matter of seconds.

“On that note, Master Ruijerd, what do you say to studying North God Style?”

Don’t do it. If you say yes, you’re gonna get dragged off to Fort Necross. This is fraudulent solicitation!

“You’d make North King or North Emperor in no time, and if you were one of the leading disciples of North God Style, that would improve the world’s impression of the Superd. The ruler of the Asura Kingdom is close to Master Rudeus, so as a leading disciple of North God Style, you could get a knighthood, even as a Superd.” Sandor’s sales pitch rolled off his tongue. I could see his ulterior motive—he wanted to share a workplace with this guy he looked up to.

Personally, I didn’t see anything wrong with that. In the event that the Biheiril Kingdom refused to take in the Superd, they could agree to move to the Asura Kingdom. Then Ariel’s authority would protect them. We’d have to think a bit about where they’d live, but one idea was the forest in the north of the kingdom. We went through there when we infiltrated the Asura Kingdom in secret. That could work. It didn’t belong to any country in particular, so surely no one would complain.

I didn’t think the Superd would want to move again, but if a little more patience would make them safe, that had to be the better option.

Then Ruijerd replied.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t intend to leave the village for some time.”

“I see... Excuse me, I got a little ahead of myself.”

Well, the village was a big project itself. People don’t like to leave once they’ve put down roots. Ruijerd wanted to give this place his best shot.

“Heh heh, be that as it may. Ruijerd Superdia, I am here to see you!”

“Yes.”

“Heh, eheheh... Be not afraid. We are allies this time. A demon king clashes with the other strong warriors on the same side, but deep down she acknowledges their strength. Yes, that’s right, I acknowledge your skill! I

wasn't lying when I said I think highly of you. The Superd warriors were mighty, after all."

"...Yes. They were outstanding warriors."

Maybe it was because Sandor had told her off, but Atofe was being pretty friendly by her typical standards. I doubted she'd come looking for a fight. It was like she'd caught sight of a familiar face and come to say hello or something.

Suddenly, I felt someone's gaze. I looked back and saw Norn looking my way, her expression troubled.

She was curled up, so I hadn't noticed, but she was sitting right between Atofe and Ruijerd. Her eyes were pleading with me to do *something*. I shook my head to tell her this was out of my hands, at which she looked like she might cry.



Chapter 9: Making Peace with the Ogre God

FOUR DAYS AFTER THE BATTLE, the group that had gone to the Second City of Irelil as envoys came back. They brought us a reply from the Biheiril Kingdom. It was all written in a letter that went on at length about this and that.

“The king says he’ll meet with you. He said that if you do something about the force on Ogre Island, he’ll consider the matter of the Superd.”

That was the general gist of it. It at least sounded like he was likely to allow the village to continue to exist. Despite the speed of their return and the messy handwriting—like it had been scrawled in a hurry—the seal was genuine. The force on Ogre Island would be Moore and the others, left there by Atofe. They’d taken all the villagers on the island hostage and barricaded themselves there, on Atofe’s orders. At this stage, it didn’t look like the Ogre God was going to go beat them into submission... I guessed that meant we’d be talking about how to clean it up.

“...All right.”

It wasn’t like I had any pressing requests other than the Superd. I did have to ask about Geese, but that was all.

“Then let’s go.”

I’d take a few Superd with me. We still had negotiations to go through, but if the Superd were going to keep living in the Biheiril Kingdom, they ought to reveal themselves so the citizens would accept them. Otherwise, they could end up in another situation like this. It was also possible citizens’ groups who saw the Superd might stage a protest. Much as I’d *like* to have a ceremony where the Ogre God and the Superd village head shook hands...

Anyway, while I was musing about that, I chose my team members to take to the capital. First, in case of battle, I’d bring Eris, Atofe, Sandor, and Ruijerd. Cliff of the Millis Church would be negotiator, and Elinalise would accompany him. Finally, we’d take two Superd warriors with us. The rest

would stay behind in case the village was attacked. They weren't team members, but we'd also return the prisoners. To tell you the truth, the king hadn't asked for their return. It was tragic, but I was a man of my word. Well, I say that, but it was always possible negotiations would break down. I'd leave one behind as a bargaining chip.

With that, I went to the hut where the prisoners were staying. The two of them sat inside in dazed silence. They looked at me with suspicion in their eyes.

"How did you like the Superd village?" I asked. There was silence. "It's a pretty nice place, don't you think? Lots of pretty women and happy children. The food's a bit heavy on vegetables, but it still tastes good. The warriors are a bit brusque, but they're not hostile to humans. Have you understood that?"

For the few days they'd been here, the prisoners were free to move around the village. I made sure they were guarded, of course, and they'd surrendered their weapons. In order to check they weren't in disguise we'd stripped them, but apart from that, they'd been met with hospitality. After I'd emphasized to the Superd that they were to look after the prisoners like guests, they'd been kind to them. We hadn't kept them tied up or anything. They walked around the village as they pleased, and we even let them go outside the village so long as they had a Superd guard with them. I wasn't worried about them escaping; I was worried they might get attacked by Invisible Wolves. While they were out, the Superd had hunted the Invisible Wolves for the past two days, and we'd shown the prisoners the kind of monsters they were. They got the same food the villagers ate. There was still some concern about the plague, but there was nothing else to eat, so we had to make do. For the time being, we gave them Sokas tea to drink with their meals.

"...I guess I realized we'd been misled by rumors." The knights had looked despairing when we captured them, but now I was pleased to see they felt at ease.

I still hadn't told them all the great things there were to know about the Superd, but they were bound to leave with a good impression regardless. I'd keep one of them here to enjoy himself for a bit longer. It was scary to think that the moment I was gone, he might pull his mask off

and declare, “Haha! I was the Man-God’s minion all along!” To be fair, though, we’d chosen them at random, and we did a thorough physical check when we brought them back to the village. Orsted and Cliff had taken a good look at them and vouched for them, and I was leaving a few of my allies here... *It should be fine.*

“We’re going to negotiate with the kingdom, so I’m bringing one of you home with me. I’d prefer to leave the higher-ranked one of you here, if that’s all right.”

“All right.” One of the knights nodded and the other stood up. They just did what I said.

It’d suck if it turned out that they had some sort of beef with each other and this guy just abandoned the other one. But the king had, in theory, accepted my conditions. There was nothing left but to meet and discuss it.

With that, we set off from the Superd Village.

Another four days passed. Negotiations with the king came off without a hitch. The king of the Biheiril Kingdom had been terrified. He held himself like a king, but he watched my every word and gesture. Eris, Ruijerd, and Atofe’s presence had him jumpy. It was most obvious when he had to deal with Atofe. Hell, she made *me* jumpy. She was scary.

This is what the king said: All that had happened was that the Sword God and the North God had threatened him. He used a lot of pompous euphemisms, but that was his explanation. I had him remove all his rings and allow me to use the Stone of Absorption just in case, but it looked like Geese hadn’t changed places with him.

But Geese *had* been involved. We’d been conned.

In any case, after some hardball negotiating where I dropped the prisoner’s name, the king said that so long as we did something about the army on Ogre Island, he’d give full recognition to the Superd. It wasn’t like we were pressing for anything unreasonable like massive reparations or

land. All we were asking was recognition for the people who'd lived in this land from the start, and who'd helped the kingdom.

On top of that, launching the hunting party, which had brought about our current situation, had been Geese acting on his own authority. I guess all the king could do was sigh and accept it.

I think the decisive factor was that if he turned down our request here, that would mean severing ties with the ogres. It would look like the Biheiril Kingdom was abandoning the ogre prisoners. This country relied on its close ties with the ogres, so cutting ties with them would spell its end.

With the negotiations over, we made our way to the Third City of Heirelil. It was very far away, a port city from which you could faintly make out an island like a volcano. I would wait here while Sandor and Atofe went over to the island to negotiate, serving as my envoys to Ogre Island. I wanted to go too but ran up against the fact that the Version One couldn't go on a boat. There weren't any boats that could take its weight.

It was concluded that, since we didn't know what the Ogre God would do, I should stick close to the Version One. If negotiations with the Ogre God went ahead without any issues and we freed the hostages on Ogre Island, our business in the Biheiril Kingdom would be concluded.

The Superd, by the way, had gotten permission to live away from the Ravine of the Earthwyrm, closer to the entrance to the forest. We still didn't know what had caused the plague, but this ought to get it further away from them. Moving would take a bit of work, but my involvement there was concluded. Though I still couldn't discard the possibility that, after everything, we'd end up fighting the Ogres...

The Sword God and the North God were gone. There had to be a chance we could win. Even if Geese was holding some of his forces in reserve, we could always return to the forest and regroup if things looked dicey.

I thought all this while at the top of a lighthouse, looking at the ocean with Eris and Ruijerd along as bodyguards.

It felt good to see the ocean after so long. It was broad and vast. The great field of water extended out under the clear sky, and across it, beyond the horizon, you could see an island. That was Ogre Island. Based on the name, I'd thought it might be ogre-shaped, but it was just a classic volcano island. A plume of smoke curled up from the mountain's peak. From here, it seemed imposing and unsettling, but not sinister. It looked rustic, if anything, like some place that'd have hot springs. I guessed it was just called Ogre Island because the ogres lived there.

I hadn't climbed a lighthouse just to stare at the ocean. No, I was looking for something. There was a lone boat approaching Ogre Island—the boat Atofe and Sandor were on. From the lighthouse, I would use the Eye of Distant Sight to keep an eye on the negotiations. If things went south, or the Ogre God started rampaging, or Geese popped up at the negotiation site, the idea was to blast our foes with large-scale magic from here.

It was a plan that could easily end up involving innocent ogres on Ogre Island and ruining our negotiations with the Biheiril Kingdom...but if Geese actually came, I'd fire.

“...Hey, Rudeus. Can you see them?”

“I can. Want me to describe it?”

“No need.”

With a wry smile at Eris, I resumed my surveillance. Using the Eye of Distant Sight, I could only see part of the island, the shore. People were gathered at a particularly easy-to-see spot there. That was our chosen negotiation site. On the shore, I spied one ogre far bigger than the others—Ogre God Marta. Nearby stood several ogres who looked like warriors. They must have fought a few battles because several of them were wrapped in bandages. Facing them, in black armor, was a group of creepy knights. They were Atofe's personal guard. Moore was among them. Maybe they had a few injuries themselves, but from what I could see, they were unharmed. Sure enough, their strength was overwhelmingly superior to that of the ogre warriors. Still, things might go differently if Ogre God Marta joined the fight, but they had taken the villagers as hostages. His hands were tied. Behind Atofe's personal guard I saw what had to be the hostages

—around five ogre women and children, tied up. If fighting broke out, there would be casualties. This might get messy.

I watched, heart in my throat. When Atofe and Sandor arrived, half of the hostages were released immediately. The Ogre God and Sandor discussed something, then the gathering broke up. What they'd talked about, I didn't know, but the Ogre God looked dejected. The biggest obstacle with the Eye of Distant Sight was that you couldn't hear voices.

“Rudeus!” I was asleep at the inn in the Third City of Heirelil when Eris’s voice woke me.

“...What’s up, honey? Lemme sleep a little longer.” I reached out to squeeze her breasts, but my hand was knocked aside. *Boo, you’re so mean! Like, that’s violence. I’m the one who’s in the wrong, I guess... I touched, even though I’m supposed to be celibate.*

“They’re here!”

“They?”

“Them!” Eris yelled, then ran from the room. I wished she would stop talking with her feelings. A rational person like me could never work out what she meant from vague words.

“Them...?”

Still not understanding, I got up. I rubbed my eyes, blurry with sleep, and looked out the window. There, I saw a group with dark red hair gathered in front of the inn.

“—Them!” I rushed out of the room down to the first floor.

The Ogre God sat, legs crossed, in front of the inn. The young ogres standing around him were watching him with pained expressions. Facing them were Eris and Ruijerd, weapons drawn and ready. When I stepped forward the crowd parted to clear a path. I walked toward the Ogre God. Once there, Sandor whispered in my ear.

“The Ogre God wants to make peace. It didn’t feel like a trap, so I brought him.”

“...All right.” I wasn’t going to say no if he said he wouldn’t fight any more. Who knew what Sandor expected, but it didn’t seem anything like a Geese scheme. From what I’d seen, Eris, Ruijerd, and Atofe weren’t stanced up, either. I guessed something had happened that convinced them to drop their guards.

The Ogre God glowered at me, then in a searching tone, said, “You, chief?”

“Yes. I’m Rudeus Greyrat. I’m in charge.”

“Me Marta.” I bowed and Marta, still sitting, bowed back. “Want talk.”

“...I have some questions of my own.” Copying the Ogre God, I sat down on the ground and crossed my legs. *He’s in the same pose, so I hope it won’t come across as rude...* I thought, just as a young ogre beside the Ogre God promptly knelt beside me and placed a wide, shallow cup on the ground before both me and the Ogre God. They were sake cups.

The cups were filled right away, mine with what seemed to be a local spirit. Into the Ogre God’s cup went a black liquid. That was probably soy sauce.

Between the soy sauce and the miso, the culture here seemed like Japan’s.

“Drink,” he said.

“Thank you.” The Ogre God downed his drink, and I copied him. It might be polite to drain your glass...but it’d be bad if I got drunk, so I stopped at a mouthful.

Now, where should I start? I suppose asking about Geese. If he’s a disciple.

Master Ogre God didn’t look all that clever. I’d have to make my explanation of difficult matters simple, easy to understand. Gently, like when I taught something to Eris.

“I hear story.” The Ogre God hesitated a moment, then said, “Demon King attack village. Steal food. Not forgive. But no-fighters all alive.” He

looked at the ogres around us.

All alive...? If there was any fighting, no matter how minor, surely there were deaths...? Oh, he must mean no noncombatants died.

Apparently, even Atofe was capable of that kind of judgment, although obviously Moore had been the one to strategize it that way.

“I break, your house. But your no-fighters, I leave. Even.”

I didn’t say anything.

“Ogres protect kingdom. Kingdom admit, lost to you. Me ogre chief. No more reason to fight. Make peace.”

He wasn’t going to forgive Atofe for attacking the village. He’d attacked the office. At the same time, he hadn’t attacked any noncombatants. We were even. The ogres had a duty to protect the kingdom, but the kingdom had already admitted defeat. As the chief of the ogres, he saw no reason to fight, so he wanted to make peace. Something like that.

“What about Geese? Did he ask something of you?”

“Geese say you destroy kingdom. So I help. But Geese run away. You not destroy. Keep going, kingdom and ogres destroyed.”

Geese had said that I was going to destroy the Biheiril Kingdom. I hadn’t done it, and not only that, but Geese had fled. If this went on, the kingdom and the ogres would both be destroyed without a doubt.

“Geese lied. No more trust.”

I hadn’t destroyed the kingdom. It was all Geese’s lies.

“I surrender. Me, ready to die. But no-fighters, please spare.” With that, the Ogre God prostrated his massive bulk on the ground. It was like a kowtow. The young ogres around us were all silent. They must have thought I’d probably kill the Ogre God there. Obviously, you killed your enemy. Even though they didn’t like it, they were going to go along with it. The Ogre God would die, and they would live on. What was with the tragic nobility? Then, I understood. The kingdom had admitted defeat, which meant the Ogre God and the others had no backup. My side was stronger. Should we decide to fight, we could trample Ogre Island... Not that I saw much point in that.

Anyway. Should I kill him? Or not? The Ogre God had said he wouldn't trust Geese anymore. He didn't strike me as a man who lied, so I'd trust him. He wasn't eloquent, but he didn't seem stupid. If I'd interpreted what he said correctly, it was all clearly reasoned. He had a higher IQ than a certain immortal demon king.

But if he were smart, he might be lying.

I thought for a minute, then asked him one last question. "Master Ogre God, you're not a disciple of the Man-God, are you?"

"No. Geese say Man-God's name. Me not know. Even if I know, island precious."

The Ogre God's gaze was clear and powerfully direct. If he was lying, I could never trust anything again.

"Then I accept," I said. The relief from around us was palpable. I should let him live. That would be better for later.

"One thing though, Master Ogre God. I want you to fight against Geese. I'd hate to do it, but if you run or betray me, I'll attack the island."

If we were thinking about foiling Geese's trap, this was our best shot. The Ogre God's connection to the ogres ran deep. I didn't like making threats, but I couldn't have him betraying me at the eleventh hour.

"Understood. I fight alone?"

"No, with us."

"And I die, what of no-fighters?"

"In regard to the surviving ogres, one of us...well, whoever survives will take responsibility for their care."

"Not lie." The Ogre God nodded. With that, the young ogre from before poured more soy sauce into the Ogre God's cup and more alcohol into mine. He raised his cup and I, copying him again, raised mine.

"On the ogre's horns."

"...On the name of the Dragon God." I said it at random, but the Ogre God looked at me dead serious and nodded with a grunt of agreement. Then, he drained his cup.

So concluded our war with the Ogre God.

That night, there was a banquet on the coast near Heirelil. The ogres hauled their liquor up from the cellar and served it up to everyone, us included. It turned out the ogres had a custom of sharing a drink after making up with an opponent after a battle. They drank and washed the slate clean. That was ogre-style peacemaking.

At the ogres' encouragement, I put back a good number of drinks. Halfway through the night, when I couldn't take any more, I left the floor to Atofe. A drinking competition was underway between her and the ogres, so she was welcome to keep the party going.

All the drinking had made me feel sick, so I used an antidote to relieve the nausea and then wandered through the banquet for a while. It hit me that a certain person wasn't there, so I made my way to the shore. There I found Sandor, drinking alone.

"Ah, well met," he said.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"Not at all." I sat down next to him and let out a breath. What was he thinking about, all the way over here? I could guess, even in my current dulled state. He was thinking about Alec. At the last, he had called Alec to surrender. Even as North God, when he faced down his son, he couldn't have wanted to kill him. That didn't mean I was about to apologize for doing the deed. If I'd backed out of that fight and let Alec go, we might not have been having this banquet. The North God could have met up with Geese, teamed up with the Ogre God, and attacked us yet again. Despite his pondering, I didn't get the impression that Sandor thought my call was wrong. He hadn't said anything, but he wouldn't let his feelings get in the way of his judgment.

"It's too bad about Alec."

"Yes."

Being right was one thing. Staying quiet about it was another.

“That boy... He was always talented. Put a sword in his hands and no one could wield it better. When he fought monsters, he saw their weak points straight away. No one in his generation could best him.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I had high expectations, you know. I told him to take the King Dragon Blade and the name of North God. I wonder if that wasn’t a mistake.”

Alec had been caught up in fantasies of heroism to the point of obsession.

“At the end of the day, *North God* is only a name. He lost his way.” Sandor drained his glass.

I had nothing I could say to him. With more experience under his belt, he would have acquired what he needed to merit the North God name. I couldn’t say that to him. Alec was gone.

“What’s done is done. It’ll weigh on me for a while, but you needn’t worry about it, Master Rudeus. It was battle, no more than that.”

“...Do you think so?”

“I hear you have a lot of children. Well...someday, you may reckon with it yourself.”

The feelings of a parent outliving their child were still unknown to me. I hoped they would stay that way.

“Anyway. I hope you’ll mourn my son.”

“I will.”

Our conversation petered out. I heard the crash of the waves before us and reveling voices behind us. Chatter about the last battle backed with celebratory music; it drove home that the battle was really over. We hadn’t defeated Geese, or even seen him. Even so, it was over. That cast a slight cloud of unease over the finished battle. The fight had ended up being close to a clean sweep, but there’d been a lot of close calls where luck had determined the outcome. What about next time? Could we repeat this time’s performance and win? That was asking a lot. Geese would be back with a new plan before long.

“I wonder who the Man-God’s final disciple is,” was what I said in the end. It wasn’t the Sword God, or the North God, and apparently not the Ogre God either. If Geese and Abyssal King Vita were our known quantities, then there was one more currently eluding me. The Ogre God had said that Geese had fled. If my predictions were correct, he’d have taken whoever didn’t show up in the last fight and got out of here, keeping his forces intact for next time. Something nagged at me, though, something I had to be forgetting; one missing piece. There should have been someone else who seemed like a disciple, and I should have heard something about possible candidates. Nothing had come up.

“Indeed. To be honest, I have no idea either. Perhaps there’s a different disciple working in a different place.”

A different disciple in a different place? At that, I thought of my house. The Ogre God hadn’t attacked it, but someone else could have moved on it. We still had no way of getting home. We’d made peace here... but it took longer than planned. War could have broken out in Sharia as we sat around basking in our victory.

I sighed. It was no good stewing on it. I was worried, but I had to leave things in Sharia to the people in Sharia. Only, I didn’t want to know what it felt like to lose a child. I was fighting because I didn’t want to know that feeling.

I took another drink and gulped it down to wash those worries away. I wanted to get home soon.

“What’s that?” Sandor looked up. His gaze was pointed out at the ocean. “There’s something there, isn’t there?”

I looked too. It was night, and the ocean was totally dark. I couldn’t see anything. There was nothing but the sound of the waves. I peered out with the Eye of Distant Sight but still couldn’t see anything.

“Whereabouts?” I asked.

“Look. There. It’s getting closer.” My eyes still couldn’t make out anything. I strained my vision for a while, but still nothing. Maybe Sandor was drunk and seeing things.

“Should I get a light?” I suggested.

“...Can you not see it?”

“I can’t see anything. Maybe your eyes are just too good, Sandor.”

Sandor frowned, dubious. Fair, I couldn’t really talk when I had the Eye of Distant Sight. Maybe I was looking the wrong way because I was drunk. Could it be higher up?

“...It can’t be! Master Rudeus, close your demon eyes!”

“Huh? Oh, um, okay.” I closed my eyes.

“Not like that, stop putting magic into your demon eyes! Absolutely nothing!”

I didn’t reply but did what he said and cut off the magic to the demon eyes, both the Demon Eye of Foresight and the Eye of Distant Sight. Now I was seeing with my normal eyes.

“...What.” I saw it! Something was rising out of the ocean onto the beach right there. They were big. Two and a half meters...about the same height as the Ogre God. They wore golden armor. They had six arms. On their shoulder...on their shoulder was a person. The person, wearing a robe with a strange design, lowered the hood of that robe to reveal an all-too-familiar face.

“Well, well! Fancy running into you here, boss!”

It was a man with a monkey face.

Geese. Geese Nukadia!

“Aw, shucks. Here I thought we’d get onto land without you spotting us, yet here you are. No luck, eh?”

“Fwahahaha! You should always expect your plans to go awry!”

“Heh, if that ain’t the truth.”

The man in golden armor answered Geese’s jibe. I recognized that voice. I could never forget that laugh.

“Lord Badi...” I said.

It was Badigadi.

Why is he here? Why’s he wearing that? Why’s he with Geese? Did the Ogre God betray us? Did Sandor call them? Surely not, but...come on...

what?

A million different thoughts raced about my mind but couldn't coalesce into words. An unfathomable tremor rose from deep within my body. That golden armor was bad news. I didn't know in precisely what way, but I could tell it was sinister. This was an opponent who'd kill me in an instant if I fought as I was.

“It’s been too long, Rudeus! You too, Alex!”



Sandor was staring blankly, but his brow glistened with sweat. I got the sense that he felt he had to attack *now*, but he couldn't move.

“Uncle. What brings you here?”

“What else? I am a disciple of the Man-God!” Badigadi declared. Without hesitation, with his head held high, he said that he was the final disciple.

“...Right.”

So that was it. It made sense. Hadn't everyone else implied as much? Both Orsted and Kishirika had told me there was a good chance that Badi was a disciple. The one who had brought Ruijerd to the Superd Village was none other than Badigadi. How had I forgotten? I felt the last piece fit into place.

“At the Man-God's request, I delivered Ruijerd to the Superd Village. Then, in preparation for battle, I went to get this armor from where it had sunk in the middle of the ocean. You have nowhere to run! And so Abyssal King Vita, the Sword God, the North God, and the Ogre God, and I, with our powers combined, will defeat you and Dragon King Orsted—”

“Whoa, whoa, *buddy!*”

“Whassat now? Just when I was getting into my stride...”

“Too much chatter. There ain't no need to tell 'em that much.”

“Blegh, you're no fun. What point is there in having a plan for if not to gloat over revealing it at the end?”

Geese scratched his face and shrugged helplessly.

With what Badi said, it all fell into place for me. I'd been right. The Sword God, the North God, and the Ogre God weren't the Man-God's disciples. If I'd let North God Kalman III go, the battle would have continued. The hunting party wouldn't have disbanded. We'd still be caught up in a standoff in the forest.

Meanwhile, these two would have arrived at Ogre Island. They'd have cleared out Atofe's personal guard and relieved the Ogre God's fears. Fighting just the North God and the Ogre God had been hard enough. If Badi had joined them, we'd have been doomed.

Now it was different. Abyssal King Vita was dead. The Sword God, dead. The North God, dead. The Ogre God had withdrawn. We only had to contend with Geese and Badi.

“Oh yeah, I know all about it, Boss. The Man-God told me about how you won in the forest. Bet you think we haven’t got a hope, traipsing in now.”

Geese wouldn’t be of any use in a fight. That meant we could win... We could win, right? Why was he so relaxed?

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. This gent here, he’s a living legend, y’know?”

At the word “legend,” Badi leaned back with a swagger.

“Four thousand and two hundred years ago, I, the strongest of the demon kings, took Demonic Dragon King Laplace down with me...”

I gulped. Badi’s armor, as though to make its presence known, began to glow. “I am Fighting God Badigadi. I can take you by myself.”

Of course. Of course. That was the Fighting God armor. His whole body radiated an unnatural aura. It was like the chill I’d felt facing down Orsted when he was fighting in earnest. I instinctively knew I couldn’t win.

Just then, Badigadi unfolded his arms and spread them wide. “I am Fighting God Badigadi! Servant of the Dragon God, Rudeus ‘Quagmi—’!”

“I am Alex Kalman Rybak, North God Kalman II! Immortal Demon King Badigadi, I challenge you to single combat! On the honor of the immortal demons, I trust you will honor my challenge!”

Badi froze. Then, he looked at Geese beside him with a conflicted expression.

“Hrmm... I was going to challenge Rudeus to a duel.”

“Just turn him down.”

“I can’t do *that*. It is an age-old rule that a demon king cannot turn down a challenge.”

Geese looked like he couldn’t believe his ears.

Who knew how much control the Man-God had over Badi, but Geese at least didn’t have Badi fully under his thumb. Not that I had any

confidence I could control the likes of Badigadi and Atofe.

“Master Rudeus.” While they talked, Sandor whispered in my ear. “I will buy you time. While I do that, please fall back, gather your forces, and work out a plan.”

“What about you?”

“I will die here.”

My breath caught. I couldn’t muster a response right away. I finally managed to nod. Right now, I wasn’t armed. The Version One was near at hand, but I wasn’t wearing it. This wasn’t a question of safety margins. I had absolutely zero chance of winning. Even if I fought alongside Sandor, I’d only get in his way. There were nothing but cons to my fighting here, no pros.

“Thank you,” I said, then I ran back toward the village.

Behind me the ferocious clash of swords echoed.

Interlude: The Armor

IHAD NOT LONG BEEN GIVEN LIFE in this world when my father spoke thus to me: *There is one person in this world you must not make an enemy of.*

I asked the reason, but my father would not tell me, offering only a vague response. Such memories of my infant years are fond and rare.

Time passed, and at the conclusion of the Second Great Human-Demon War, a certain saying began to spread: *There are three people in this world you must not make enemies of.*

Well, wasn't that interesting? One had become three. Yet, when I first heard the specifics, I was overcome by laughter. Those three were the Dragon God, the Demon God, and the Fighting God. I couldn't stop myself from asking back, quite genuinely, "Wouldn't that be four people?" By rights, the Technique God ought to have been on that list.

Alas, few had seen the Technique God, and his very existence was doubtful at best. As a wise and all-knowing demon king, I knew that—be they three or be they four—the truth remained the same. There had in truth only been one person not to make an enemy of, and that was the Demonic Dragon God Laplace. He had always been the greatest of all until he was split in two in the Second Great Human-Demon War. Even afterward, he continued to tyrannize the world through fear. He was truly the greatest in the world. For my own part, whenever I encountered a youth drunk on their own strength, I told them, "There are three people in this world you must not make enemies of." The North God Kalman especially took such a liking to it that he allegedly repeated it every chance he got. He was always so susceptible to the influence of others.

Ah, but if you asked today's young people to name which three people they must not make enemies of, you may well end up with a different three. I expect some would even name North God Kalman. The threat of Laplace had faded. More than four centuries had passed, after all.

So much the better. Laplace was terrifically powerful. I've lived a long time, but I have never encountered a greater threat than he.

Yet the Man-God told me such a greater threat does exist, in the form of the current Dragon God—Dragon God Orsted. That would be the man to whom the great Dragon God Urupen passed his skills. They say he's what, the hundredth Dragon God? I scarcely believed the line had continued for so long, but the great Urupen always did play fast and loose with numbers. The actual number of generations was likely irrelevant.

In any case, this Dragon God Orsted was supposed to be terrifically powerful, so much so that he surpassed the Demon God and the Technique God—so much so that he could even defeat Demonic Dragon God Laplace. I'd be hard-pressed to say I believed such a story. I myself fought Laplace once, and his gruesomeness was beyond my power to express it. A power greater than that? Inconceivable! Fwahahaha!

Yet, that cowardly god of men who looked down on all of us on this earth as scum, that model of arrogance whom even Laplace dared not challenge—he feared only this Dragon God. He took such pains to stop, nay, to kill that man with the fearful countenance, and yet he had never once succeeded. Would you believe it? He even came and bowed his head to me! Just that should be enough to make one believe it.

Now, was there anyone out there who could defeat such a mighty being? The answer to that was no. There wasn't even anyone who could defeat Demonic Dragon God Laplace. I professed no great knowledge of the subject, but my father said that none have rivaled the Dragon God's power for more than ten thousand years. Was it any wonder? Physically he was the strongest—wearing his invincible armor and wielding his unmatched martial skills, how could anyone ever best him?

Four hundred years ago, in the Laplace War, it was only narrowly and with the power of the Seven Legendary Heroes that Demon God Laplace was sealed away, and he only had half of his power then.

No, don't tell me! You've a question about that, don't you? You want to know why Demonic Dragon God Laplace isn't around today. Why was he split into Technique God Laplace and Demon God Laplace, with Orsted inheriting the Dragon God name?

I have one answer for you. It was because another appeared, bearing the name of Fighting God. Another Fighting God, you say? Well, that just came down to a simple case of stolen identity. A man stole Laplace's ultimate armor—the Fighting God Armor he'd crafted himself. This Fighting God Armor is terrifically powerful, you know. Such is the power it confers upon its wearer; you might think it was created specifically to vanquish a god. Admittedly, any ordinary person would die the moment they put it on... Not only that, but that armor would kill anyone who wore it for too long, no matter if they were abnormally skilled. Even Demonic Dragon God Laplace fought without it in the final days of the Second Great Human-Demon War. It was not an item to mess with.

But I digress. The thief obtained the power of the armor, fought the Demonic Dragon God, and they ended up taking each other down. Ironic, isn't it? Defeated by the very armor he himself created.

“...Jeez, you talk a lot. What’s your point here?”

“That if we only had the Fighting God Armor, we might even be able to defeat Dragon God Orsted! That is my point!”

“And what if we don’t have it?”

“Then we shall surely lose. The young North God and the toothless Sword God may claim otherwise, but I, who have fought the Dragon God and survived, know better than anyone his strength.”

Geese was silent.

“Though I am an immortal demon, I expect I should die if I fought him, for he knows ways to kill even those of my kind.”

“Then what’s the plan?”

“We go and get it, of course.”

“Yeah, easy enough to say, but it’s not like this crazy armor is just sitting around in a basement somewhere, right?”

“They say it is kept tightly sealed and the journey there is treacherous!”

“Well, ain’t that a headache. Can’t pop in and grab it then, huh?”

“Fwahahaha. To me, it might as well be my basement!”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think it’ll feel like that for me...”

Geese sighed as though he were fed up. It was too late; before our eyes yawned the mouth of a great hole. We were in the middle of the ocean. Here and there, parts of a reef peeked out. Here, in a patch of ordinary, unremarkable ocean, lay a hole around fifty meters across. Water came welling up from it. That’s right, not flowing in—welling up. Who knew whence it sprang and to where it flowed? Those with the eyes to see it would also notice that the hole emitted a terrific quantity of magic. Of course, that included myself.

“This place’s full to bursting with some crazy energy.”

“You feel it, then!”

“I’ve raided an S-rank Teleportation Labyrinth and even that had nothing on this...”

“Fwahahaha! But of course! This labyrinth, you see, is different from other labyrinths. It is a mana collection point that spawned in the Second Great Human-Demon War. It is where a vast continent vanished, inhabited by the wandering souls of many millions of demons.

“This is one of the world’s three great labyrinths: the Devil’s Cave!”

From where he sat on my shoulder, Geese went, “Eep.”

Labyrinths were apt to spawn in areas of highly concentrated mana. The true nature of mana was still poorly understood, but it altered animals and plants and could sometimes even effect changes in inorganic materials. Labyrinths themselves were caves and ruins that had undergone such changes. As more and more mana accumulated, it brought about unfavorable effects. Monsters multiplied, trees grew thick, and sometimes sickness broke out. It was one thing for us demons, but a human body would wilt if exposed once to a great volume of mana. Though it seemed humans had grown unexpectedly hardy in recent times, for I now rarely heard of such cases.

The laws of how mana gathered were a mystery to me, but perhaps mana had some property where it was drawn to itself—monsters attacked humans to feed on their mana, and labyrinths absorbed the creatures that perished within them. This was why humans built their settlements and flourished in places where the mana was thinner. Towns and villages of the present day sprouted up in places where the concentration of mana was low. Even Rikarisu, where Kishirika's castle once stood, was the same. There was nowhere else on the Demon Continent with such thin mana. Or at least, it had been so once before. Things appeared to be different now.

None of the above applied to Atofe's fortress, by the way. I imagined she thought living in a place crawling with monsters would look the part for a demon king. My older sister was simpleminded like that.

But let us return to labyrinths. Labyrinths often spawned in places seething with highly concentrated mana—that is, so-called mana pools. The denser the mana, the vaster, deeper, and more enigmatic the labyrinth grew. Thus, labyrinths usually sprouted up within forests, wild places, mountains—places away from people. Such places started off rich in mana, and so were prone to the development of mana pools. Mana pools were naturally occurring, but they had a limited capacity. Mana pools that exceeded that set capacity were, in a sense, artificial creations.

Death. When a person died, mana remained. Under normal circumstances, the mana quickly dissipated or else was used to turn the body into an undead.

Should a great number of lives come to an end in a small area, the mana, through its property of mutual attraction, would not scatter but instead begin to converge. At the end of the Second Great Human-Demon War, the blast that occurred when Laplace and I struck one another down wiped out the continent, and together with it, multitudes of people, animals, and monsters. The mana it produced converged at the origin of the explosion and gave birth to a labyrinth. That labyrinth was the Devil's Cave.

It was the worst of the worst, easily on par with the Pit of the Dragon God on Mount Dragoncry in the Red Wyrm Mountains and Hell on the Divine Continent.

“Phew... So, is this where we go down?”

It was perilous to venture into its depths. First, there was a vertical tunnel spanning around twenty meters that connected the entrance to the first level. The walls were waterfalls flowing in reverse, and behind them lived great swarms of sea snakes large enough to easily swallow a person whole. Even for me, it would take three days to properly clear the place.

“Did the Man-God say anything?”

“‘Jump.’ The snakes will go for any sucker who goes along the surface of the water, but if you fall through the middle, they don’t care.”

“Fwahaha. Then this shall be easy! Hup!”

“Oowah!”

I jumped! With Geese still on my shoulder, I leapt into midair and let momentum carry us into the center of the hole. Wind rushed about my body as I dropped down into the abyss. Ah, the sensation of dropping down was always a good one! Let me see, when was the last time I dropped from a high place? Was it when I jumped down the cliff in the Red Wyrm Mountains, or was it when I jumped into the great canyon on the Demon Continent? I cannot soar through the skies like Atofe or Kishirika, so it had been quite some time.

Ah ha, there were a great many eyes peering out from the water’s surface. Those would be the sea snakes. I supposed if I were to so much as brush the surface with my fingers, the snakes would immediately burst forth and attack. That’s right! They had an incredibly dull name: Fall Dragons. Humans had a bad habit of pinning the name *dragon* on anything with a head shaped a bit like a lizard, even when they looked nothing at all like dragons.

Now, while some monsters will always attack, sometimes you get beasties like these that lay in wait. Funny how that happens.

“W-whoa there! You can land properly, right?”

“Fwahahaha! Contrary to what you might think, landings are my specialty!”

“They’d better be!”

Such a skeptical man! Then again, Geese’s fears were justified. The bottom of the hole was dark, and it was hard to make out where we’d come

down. I didn't know myself yet, so I supposed he couldn't help but worry I'd botch it.

“Light as a feather!”

I never botch anything. I hit the ground with both legs, using the springs in my knees to their full capacity to absorb the impact even as the bones cracked. My hip bone cracked as well. By using my internal organs for cushioning, I stopped the force from traveling through my upper body. Then I used six of my fingers to lift Geese up and killed the last of the force with my elbow.

It was perfect!

“Guh!”

At least, I thought so, but Geese turned blue as all the air was knocked out of his lungs.

“Ack, ack...” After a few moments of silence, he gave a loud cough and started breathing again. How weak he must have been, to struggle to breathe after a little bump like that!

“I was right, was I not?”

“Yeah, well.” He seemed displeased but could not complain. His life had never been in any danger.

“Now, then.”

We were on the first level. Spread out at the bottom of the vast hole was an equally vast underground lake. Great pillars towered up to support the roof. Strange as it was to say, there was water pooling up on the roof as well. The place was inundated above and below. Just like the sort of riddle you'd find in ruins. Land was visible here and there, but the edge of the lake was lost to view. If we were to go any further down, we would have no choice but to immerse ourselves in the watery depths...

At the bottom of this lake, there were little crab-like creatures. I mean *truly* tiny, no bigger than your little finger. They accumulated at the bottom. At a glance, you might not think them any great threat, but when a foe dived down below a certain depth, they'd all strike as one, stripping flesh from bones in seconds.

Were I alone, I could endure it. Geese they'd turn into a skeleton.

None of the monsters from here on had names, by the way. If Laplace were still alive, the old dog would probably have come and named them one by one. They say he was *meticulous* like that.

“Fwahahaha! What will you do from here?”

“Gimme a second,” Geese said, then got down from my shoulder and closed his eyes. He turned three times in a circle, then raised his arm. “Guess it’s that way.”

“Fwahahaha! Fascinating! Some little charm your people use, is it?”

“Nah. The Man-God said if I did it, we’d get through.”

“Fwahahaha! You asked for the answer? How very boring! When you explore a labyrinth you make a *map*, with all the minutest details, do you not?”

“I don’t have time for that!”

I imagined he did not. For my own part, I was rather partial to the kind of exacting work that would go into searching for the only path to the bottom of this whole sprawling space. Shorter-lived races always wanted to cut down on wasted time. Even though wasting time was what made that time so special...

“Fwahahaha! Then let us be off!”

“Yeah.”

I laughed, then put Geese on my back and started swimming through the total silence of the underground lake. I sensed something squirming around far, far below us, but I was sure they wouldn’t come up.

I swam like that for a long time. Around when Geese started nodding off on my back, I saw an island poking out of the underground lake. Tentatively, I went ashore and found it had a stone floor and, in the center, a staircase that led down.

“It took this damn long to get through the first level? At *top speed*? Just how big is this place?”

“Indeed...” As I listened to Geese’s grumbling, I narrowed my eyes at the staircase. Something about it was familiar.

After that, we went on descending level after level. Geese had the method of “clearing” each level memorized perfectly—these methods, shown to him by the Man-God, were utterly insane. I spent the entire journey wondering how we’d managed to get through one level, or why we hadn’t encountered any monsters on another. It was incomprehensible. Had Geese ever questioned it...? No, he wouldn’t. This man wouldn’t be alive today if he’d even once doubted the words of the Man-God. His gratitude to the Man-God must have been absolute.

“Fwahahaha! What’s such a grandiose door doing in the depths of a labyrinth?”

“Dunno. I guess even labyrinths have appearances to maintain.”

“Fwahahahahaha! Showing off, is it? That’s a good one! Fwahahaha!”

Before us was an enormous door around ten meters tall. It was about as big as the door that had been fitted on Kishirika’s castle during the Second Human Demon War. From when it was built to when it was lost, that door never opened even once. See, its excessive size made it damn difficult. Even beings larger than I used the side door next to it to make their way inside. That took me back! In those days, I’d go on about why anyone would make such an enormous door that didn’t even open, saying that we ought to melt down the metal and turn it into weapons for the soldiers.

But Kishirika shot me down with some nonsense about how “If a champion shows up and finds a run-down gate it’ll ruin my reputation as the Demon World’s Great Emperor.”

Had it ever been opened, in the end? Perhaps Laplace opened it. Though if he smashed it down, then that meant there was some meaning in its existence... Back then, I thought I was right about everything. Only now, when I stood on the side of the challenger, I wondered about that so-called *authority* of Kishirika’s... But no, in fact, I didn’t understand it at all! Fwahahaha! This door was clearly far too big! It just looked like a wall! A

champion faced with this door wouldn't try to force it open, they'd just go through the side door!

“They’re behind that.”

“It would seem so.”

I agreed with Geese. Labyrinths had grandiose things like this at their deepest point. The stronger the labyrinth, the stronger the inclination toward grandiosity. Amongst those I’d seen, the deepest point of the Black Steel Labyrinth was particularly magnificent with its golden door. Kishirika would have liked it.

Back to the matter at hand. What lay behind the door in the deepest part of the labyrinth was its guardian, so to speak. When we opened this door, a battle with the most powerful monster in the labyrinth would begin. Of course, the level of the guardian of the Devil Cave would go beyond my wildest imaginings... That was no trouble. Geese would have been told how to beat it. It might’ve been a hard fight, but we would emerge victorious in the end.

I suddenly lost the desire to laugh and closely examined the door.

“What’s up, bud? Haven’t lost yer nerve, have you?”

“Yes,” I said shortly. Geese turned back to stare at me.

“H-hey, now! What’s wrong? I can’t be hearing this from *you*. Yeah, we’re about to face the guardian of this hellhole labyrinth, I get it, we gotta take that seriously! But you’re an immortal demon king, right?! Like you’ve got anything to fear.” The monkey-faced demon’s tone was wry. Geese always put on a joking voice when he was trying to persuade someone. Then, when the moment came, he’d get serious and stab his words right into his mark’s heart. I suppose that was his brand of charm. No matter.

“...Hm.”

“Don’t tell me you’re actually intimidated?”

I was not, of course. In the first place, as an immortal demon, I had nothing to fear from battle. Whatever happened, I would not die.
Fwahahahaha!

Anyway.

“Behold.” I turned. Behind us, death was everywhere. Flames erupting out of nowhere. Never-ending earthquakes. Cracks opened in the ground and swallowed up everything on the surface. Fallen about the space were the undead. Broken bones, ghosts that vanished like mist, and scattered pieces of blackened armor.

“Yeah, well, it’s a hellhole. If you got this far fighting proper-like, that’d be a story to hand down for generations. Only this time, well, I can’t tell anyone, and even if I did, no one’d believe it...”

“This place makes me nostalgic.”

Geese looked at me in shock. “Sorry? You what, now? You mean you’ve been here before?”

“Indeed. But not this place!”

It had been the day the Second Great Human-Demon War ended. In order to rescue Kishirika, I donned the Fighting God Armor and returned to the demon headquarters. That was when I saw it. Because of the incredibly high concentration of mana in front of Kishirika’s new castle, everyone who died there became undead before an hour had passed. I knew the faces of all of them. They were true warriors all, who had pledged their loyalty to Kishirika and had their power recognized by her—Kishirika’s personal guard. I expected they fought prepared to die, but in the end, they’d all fallen to the same sword. I knew, because they’d all been turned into headless Dullahans.

Visible vestiges of them had been left in the Undead I faced. I saw many of the same face; these undead had been generated as copies. I saw it clearly.

Now that I thought about it, the whole of this labyrinth had been familiar. First there was the stone spiral staircase that connected the first level to the second, then the structure like the inside of a fort. The room with a ceiling that shone as though it were full of stars; the weapon held by the man-shaped monster; the fracture in the collapsed exterior wall. The little flowers that no longer grew anywhere but here, where they bloomed at the side of the path; the monsters that were supposed to be extinct... I’d seen all of it before—I had a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

“Go on.” To quell my anxiety, I sat down. “Come now, sit down.”

Geese didn't say anything, but he sat down in front of me. Sitting like this across from another man made me want a drink, but alas, we had nothing to imbibe. This wasn't the sort of conversation to have sober, but oh well.

"Have you heard that the world used to look different to its current form?"

"That's the thing where Golden Knight Aldebaran's blow didn't just take out Kishirika Kishirisu but sundered the continent and created an ocean, yeah?"

"Yes, that."

That legend was treated as mere fiction these days. It was utterly unbelievable that one man could change the shape of a continent. People know, when they look out on the vastness of the world, that they are small, and nature is bountiful. I counted myself amongst them! The mountains, the ocean, all of nature was always magnificent and beyond our power to challenge.

"I can't really see it, but you were there, right?"

"I was."

Geese would be the same. That was why he listened like he did.

"In the days of my birth, there was no Ringus Sea."

I heard Geese gasp. As well he might! Who wouldn't make such a face upon learning that the ocean they had crossed only a few days past had once not existed? I suppose he believed it because the words came from my mouth.

"Mount Idatz, the Hills of Ares, the Mimishillan River, the Cabre Lake... Heard of them?"

Geese shook his head.

"They are all names of places that used to exist. Each had its own history. Mount Idatz, for example, was renowned as the mountain where the great elf swordsman Idatzleid perfected his art."

"Uh, wow..."

He did not know. Idatzleid had died in the First Great Human-Demon War. He was an elf swordsman who had slain many thousands of demons. At last, in the decisive battle against Necross Lacross, one of the Five Great Demon Kings, he died a heroic death. No books containing that episode remained, nor anyone who could tell it. Even the mountain that had symbolized it was gone. It was natural for Geese to be ignorant of it. It felt as though all evidence that the man had ever lived had disappeared...and yet, I tell you, I remembered. The story of the great swordsman Idatzleid was very popular during the Second Great Human-Demon War. Not to the level that everyone knew it, but everyone who swung a blade had heard some version of the tale. No one knew it anymore.

“People, buildings, and not only those but even the shape of the land was gone. We lost everything.” When I said it out loud, I felt a tightness in my chest. “That is how much power is contained in the Fighting God Armor we are going to collect.” I thought of lost things and lost memories. I thought back on all the beautiful vistas that no one remembered. “It is the power to destroy the world.”

Did Geese understand how much might be lost from here on out?

“If, in the Biheiril Kingdom, it comes to the same conclusion it did last time, the entirety of the Divine Continent and around half of the Central and Demon Continents will be wiped out.”

Geese took this in in silence.

“The great explosion will alter the landscapes of the remaining continents as well. The Central Continent will cease to maintain its current prosperity. The Great Forest may become a desert. Millis could be swallowed by the ocean and the Begaritt Continent may be pushed even farther away...”

“The races would be thrown together, and there would be conflict. Though it was not recorded in any history book, four thousand and two hundred years ago an age of darkness reigned for nigh on three thousand years. All the races wandered, searching for a land to make their own, fighting one another...”

Having said that, it was not until some years after that war ended that I awoke, so I knew little of that time. Fwahahaha!

I remembered how, after many years, the humans expelled the demons from the Central Continent and drove us over to the Demon Continent.

“Land changes, cultures change, ways of life change, and so conflict breaks out. Though it may be hard to get a sense of such things when merely hearing of them.” When I awoke, I was stunned. The world looked different from before. It had changed in every way. “It was a whole different world.”

The end of the world is less flashy than you’d expect. After a few thousand years pass, no one remembers the world that once was except for us immortal demons. I changed after that war. I became engaged to Kishirika and stopped worrying about trivial problems. We lived in contentment through days of peace. As such, I have only pleasant memories of the past four thousand and two hundred years—though I also forgot the bad ones where it suited me. Fwahahaha!

Geese was silent. In his position, he could not understand.

“With all that on my mind, I just had to stop.” Unlike Atofe, I am relatively quick on the uptake. But now that I had come to a stop, I wouldn’t move again until I was satisfied. I am, after all, a wise demon king. I cannot act unless it is rational. Fwahahaha!

Which is to say, I was waiting to be persuaded. This was where Geese’s smooth talking would be put to the test. This was a demon king’s trial.

“...Hey, bud.” After a period of silence, Geese spoke. “You’re an immortal demon, so I guess you look at the world differently from the likes of me.”

“I expect so.”

“When the land changes and cultures change, well. It probably does look like a different world to you.”

“Surely it would look that way to anyone?”

“Nah, it wouldn’t. No way.” Geese shook his head. “The way I see it, even if you don’t do nothing, just going to the neighboring country is like...

heck, it's like a different world. If you go back to your old country ten years later, it'll look totally different. Like a brand new reality."

Ten years, he said. I knew it in theory, but ten years really was a long time to most other races.

"In just ten years, there's a lot that doesn't change much, so you get moments where you see that stuff and feel at ease. Then you think about how you ain't changed either and it really brings you down." Geese spoke with the same nonchalance as he always had, but there was a weight behind his words.

"Destroy the world? You ask me, that's an honor. After the world ends, I'd like to build myself a monument." It sounded like a jape, but his tone was serious. "Only, if there's that big an explosion, I guess I won't be surviving that. Hell, I'll probably die in an aftershock halfway through the fight."

Geese looked me straight in the eyes as he went on. "The boss—Rudeus, I mean—he's an exceptional guy. Yeah, he's got magic coming out his eyeballs, but like me, he can't use battle aura. He doesn't let it get him down. He tries hard and gets clever, plus he's humble and he knows how to rely on folk. People don't rely on him, mind. He relies on them. Even though you'd think he could do whatever he wanted by himself, a guy like him who can do basically everything. He can divide up tasks among other people and they'll do it. There's not many who can do that.

"Me, I'm not strong enough to take on the boss. I know that. See, this time, what I did was bring people together. It'll be a fight on equal footing. Makes you wanna win, doesn't it? Unlike the boss, I ain't got nothing but this. I got the Sword God, the North God, the Abyssal King, the Ogre God, and now the Fighting God. Yeah, I borrowed the Man-God's powers, but I reckon I've gathered as good a force as I could've. We'll go in with a lineup like you've never seen before. I thought it up, I gathered them, and I'm going in to win. So it's nothing to me if I die along the way. I've lived a shady sort of life, doing what the Man-God told me. That's how much I valued my own skin—I've looked after it real careful, so no way am I gonna lose it, that's how I felt. I thought it was the most important thing, but I also thought maybe there might be something else more important out there somewhere. Anyway, it ends here. I know I might die, but I'm not

about to stop. So you gotta commit. My opponent's Rudeus? Well, yours is Dragon God Orsted. Against an enemy even stronger than Laplace, seems about right that the world should end, y'know?"

Risking your life was an idea unfamiliar to me, an immortal demon. The Dragon God had the power to kill immortal demons—that was what had killed my father. Yet it didn't seem real to me. Even Atofe was still going strong after being sealed away who knew how many times over. I was unfamiliar with death. Having said that, I knew that people with finite lives valued life. People like Geese held life especially dear. They wouldn't do anything important with their lives, but they treasured them, nevertheless.

...That was just it. It was now that he had the chance to do something important that he was willing to give his precious life. There was nothing that obligated me to join him... I had decided to oppose the Dragon God. I'd decided to join the Man-God. Though I'd said *never again* to myself at the end of the Second Great Human-Demon War, I had plumbed the depths of the Devil's Cave to retrieve the Fighting God Armor. Indeed, I had to commit. Just like Geese.

"Fwahahaha! Just so! Very well, let us go and obtain the world-destroying armor!"

"That's what I like to hear! Let's go!"

Dear me, I got a little tangled up in my thoughts! After that day, I ought to have known that it was better to plunge ahead without thinking about what might greet me. I was clever, but I was also foolish, and I thought that would make a man worthy of Kishirika.

Well, if so, I'd better get started! Fwahahaha!

I knew the defender of the labyrinth. He was one of those they'd called the Five Great Demon Kings during the Second Human Demon War. When I arrived at the site of the final battle, this man was already long dead. He had been the captain of Kishirika's personal guard. His name

was... No, I shall not give his name. This being had the same form, but it wasn't him.

We were at the deepest point in the Devil's Cave, so I'd been convinced we'd find someone the spitting image of Laplace. This was an anticlimax.

That this man—loyal but rigid and the type to rush headlong at everything—was the master of the Devil's Cave... It was hardly living up to its name.

“O-oy! This guy looks nasty...”

“Fwahahaha! It's true, he looks most fearful! He is no serious threat!” Standing before us was, of course, a headless knight. What had changed from long ago was that he wasn't holding his head. He wore jet-black armor and was impaled with swords. Whenever he moved, the swords made an awful scraping noise. If memory served, he'd never been one for sticking himself through with swords. Which meant... Yes, I'd thought it obvious how he'd died, but of course, he'd fought to the bitter end. But not with Laplace. He'd led an army half-destroyed by Laplace against the humans. In the end, they'd cut his head off. When you're not an immortal demon, you die when your head is cut off! I'd thought his body had been wiped out in that explosion, but it turned out he was here! Ah, such a touching reunion. Got me all choked up!

Now's the time I'd have liked to share a drink and exchange old war stories. Back then, he and I hadn't seen eye to eye at all, but nowadays! I was sure we could have enjoyed a drink together. Alas, we had to vanquish the guardian if we were to get the object we'd come for. I got straight to it. It's not like he had a head to drink with anyway! Fwahahaha!

“Fwahahaha! Come and fight me, if you dare!” I raised my fists and charged forward. In the past, I might have balked before this demon king. The captain—now he had been a strong man, especially in single combat! He could even stave off Atufe. Atufe was immortal and had a bottomless reserve of endurance, so he could only ever stave her off, but still! He reigned supreme as the strongest of the Five Great Demon Kings. He was doubtless a power to be reckoned with. Scholarly old me never once picked a fight with him. He'd have sent me flying in an instant. Ever since those days, I'd trained and trained. Using the memory of the time I'd spent

wearing the Fighting God Armor, I developed my own unique martial style and honed my muscles so that I could use it. I stayed with Atofe, who beat me to a pulp every day. I worked so that I could act with reckless arrogance too. *Who'd have thought the day would come for me to show you the results?* Fwahahaha!

“Nghuh!” As I approached him, firing myself up, his fist punched into me and sent me flying. I did three somersaults! My face had caved in. That would soon heal, though.

“Fwahahaha! This is bad! I won’t win like this!”

I got straight up again, fists raised, but the difference in strength was starkly apparent, as expected of the guardian of a high-level labyrinth! He seemed even stronger than I remembered...but no, he’d had this in him before. It was clear that, even with a bit of training and working on my personal fighting style, he still outmatched me. This wouldn’t be an easy battle.

“R-right then, listen up, you got it? He’s got a weak point!”

“Fwahahahaha! Ridiculous! A weak point, him?”

“Yeah, only what the Man-God says is...his weak point’s words! Catch my meaning?”

At Geese’s answer, I stopped moving toward the demon king. The second I stopped, he hit me with the flat of his blade and sent me flying backward.

As I flew, I thought.

Words? Even if I were to say them, he has no ears to hear any!

“...Ahah! I see!”

Words. Words?

It was true that he and I had long fought side by side in the Second Great Human-Demon War. Though we had not come to blows, we had of course exchanged words, and not a few promises. Many of them we had kept, and just as many we had broken.

Hmm, in that case...there are too many to choose from!

“I know not!” I took another punch. No, it didn’t count as a punch. His sword was so blunt that it couldn’t pierce my body.

Ahah, swords! That’s it!

“Long ago, he tried to give Kishirika a sword as an offering! The day before, he said someone broke it, but in fact...the one who broke it was me! I am sorry! I resented the idea of you rising any further! It was an impulse! Forgive me!”

“Gyaaaaah!” He lost it. Though he didn’t have a head, a cry of rage burst out from somewhere. So he could hear without ears! His race’s ears weren’t on their heads, back in the day, so perhaps they also didn’t speak with their throats?

But now wasn’t the time for such inquiry.

I’d been sorry that I wasn’t able to confess to my misdeeds, but then, all you could expect of a sword offered to Kishirika was that it would get used in a party trick and broken anyway. I didn’t feel all *that* bad.

“C’mon, you must have something else!” Geese barked. “Ain’t you the wise demon king?”

“There are too many possibilities! I can’t narrow them down!”

“Then just go through ‘em all!”

So I did.

“Remember when your daughter—”

“That glowing blue horse we found on Ruson Island! That—”

“When we defeated the human army in the Kohiba Hills—”

None of my words got through to him. Every time I said something, his sword flew out and threw me away. If I were an ordinary demon, I’d have died a hundred times over. I called myself the wise demon king, and though I had my own opinions regarding wisdom and knowledge, well, it was damned impressive how the memories kept bubbling up. It was like I was the old me again, reliving my memories. I grew a bit nervous.

“Eh?” I’d gone through a little more than a hundred recollections when I noticed something.

“O-oy! He’s slowed down a bit, hasn’t he?”

The guardian, moving with a horrible racket as his armor screeched and his sword scraped, had lost some of his vigor to be sure. I did not know which of my words had found their mark, but one of them must have.

“Right, now’s ya chance! Don’t give him time to recover!”

No, that’s not right. So I thought as I looked at the loyal guardian. Nothing I’d said had been the answer. The guardian was looking at me like it pained him, like my stories had led him to remember something. Perhaps my old stories had allowed him to somehow realize that I wasn’t an enemy. He’d lost his sense of self, but he knew that I was not someone he ought to turn his sword on. Why did he try so hard to keep fighting? He was the guardian; that was part of it. Monsters were beholden to such roles. Surely it was some regret that had turned him into the guardian. Well, then. I knew what to say to him.

“We demons lost the war, but we were not destroyed, and Kishirika Kishirisu is alive and well. We shall fight another day. Put up your sword.”

The guardian stopped moving. Then, without a word, he slowly knelt, then fell forward. It was as though he was satisfied. He was saying that now he could finally rest.

“Even after becoming the labyrinth guardian, he was still bound by loyalty. What a stick-in-the-mud.”

I hope I won’t become the guardian of a labyrinth after the fight with the Dragon God, I thought as my feet carried me onward.

At the deepest point of the labyrinth was the throne where Kishirika had sat. It was currently occupied by a suit of armor. It was beautiful. The design was simple, with curving breastplate, pauldrons, and tasset. There was nothing special about it, but you could see it was miles apart from some mass-produced product thrown on the heap at your local armorer.

If it *had* been on display at an armorer, it couldn’t have failed to draw attention with its perfectly efficient design. Whatever metal it was truly made from, it shone gold, and in the dark it emitted a faint glow. The

efficiency and the shining gold produced an awe-inspiring effect that fascinated anyone who saw it.

It was a bit smaller than the last time I'd seen it. No—there was no way the size had changed. When I first saw it, the awe it had inspired in me must have made it appear larger. Now, however, it appeared far more sinister.

“Th-this is the Fighting God Armor... W-wow... You can tell it’s crazy powerful just by looking at it.”

“Take care you do not touch it. It will suck you in.”

“R-right...” Geese then gingerly drew back his outstretched fingers.

“Fwahahaha! I jest! Nothing will happen simply by touching it!”

“C-c’mon, don’t scare me like that... Honestly, though, it feels like something *would* happen if ya touched it...”

The Fighting God Armor, built by Laplace as the ultimate armor. Nothing would happen if you touched it, but it cursed those who wore it, spurring them into battle. Remembering the old days was enough to give me goosebumps.

“Geese.”

“Yeah?”

“I know not what I will become after I put on the armor.”

Geese was silent.

“I will do my best to protect my sense of self, but it will only be a matter of time before I am lost. Worst case...”

“Worst case? Yikes, what the hell am I supposed to do then?”

“Oh, no, you need only to get me to where our enemies are. I’ll handle things after that.”

“All right, sounds doable.”

“Fwahahahahaha! I am counting on it!”

“Cool. It took a minute, but now we’ve got all the force we need to win. The Abyssal King’ll disrupt them, then the Sword God, North God and

Ogre God'll go in first...and then, in the end, if the Fighting God takes out the Dragon God, then victory's as good as sealed."

Geese sounded pleased.

Very well then!

"Well, then, for the first time in four thousand and two hundred years, I'll show our enemies what it looks like when I get serious!"

"Yeeyah! You got this, big guy!"

"Fwahahahaha!"

"Hahahaha!" Geese's laugh of relief echoed off the walls of Kishirika's former throne room.

"Much as I hate to do this when you're in such high spirits, your time's up."

I was on my high-spirited way home when the Man-God came into my dreams to provoke me. What fun.

Ah, but what a peculiar place it was—white and empty. Where it could possibly be located had always been a mystery to me. You couldn't wave it off with the excuse of it being a dream. The place was always the same, and from what I'd heard, that was true for the others the Man-God spoke to as well.

"Tch. What do you care about that for? So *annoying*."

Now, now, Man-God, settle down. You come out of nowhere saying 'time's up,' but I haven't any idea what that means. I might be the Wise Demon King, but I still need knowledge in order to understand.

"Abyssal King Vita got taken out right at the start. The Sword God and the North God found out and went charging in too soon. The Ogre God joined the fight, but then Atofe came to back up Rudeus and took the ogres hostage."

Ahh... You got thrashed, then.

“This is *your* fault, yours and Geese’s, for dawdling down in the labyrinth that long. Useless! You should have wiped the floor with a labyrinth like that! What were you even *doing*? And Geese! All that big talk from him only for it to end up like *this*? What a moron I was to count on you!”

Bwahahaha. I see how it is. The forces you assembled got taken out, and you’re sulking. You might get called a god, but in the end, you’re just a man.

“What did you say to me?”

The thing about plans is they rarely go how you’d like. One look at the Sword God and the North God should have been all it took to guess they’d run in too soon. Especially Alec. The boy never knew how to heel, not since he was a runt! Perhaps things didn’t go how you wanted, but you ought to have anticipated that. But wait...your overreliance on seeing the future means you’ve never been one to expect any other potential outcome. This sort of thing happens all the time.

“...What’s your problem?”

Bwahahaha! You’re only gonna get more wound up if you get that tetchy over every little thing! I must say, though, it’s unexpectedly refreshing to see you making that face! I like it! Once, a glimpse of that face might have shaken me—but now that I am lending you my help out of the goodness of my heart, I have nothing to fear! Bwahahaha!

“Give me a break. Sure, I can’t see your future, but I can still take away the things you hold dear...and I’ll manage it in places your eyes don’t reach.”

There’s that shortcoming of yours. You fail to get specific about those things I hold dear.

“Demon Emperor Kishirika Kishirisu.”

Oho... To be sure, the thought of you laying hands on her is not a pleasant one. But you mustn’t take all this so seriously! This is the kind of friendly banter that comes with being allies. Indeed, you and I are comrades now—brothers in arms. Taking out your irritation on your allies will only hurt their morale. You shouldn’t let on to your allies when you’re panicking—not when defeat is by no means certain.

“Uncertain? You do know more than half the allies I brought on board are down and it’s only you left now, right?”

It is not certain. It isn’t over yet. After all, Geese and I are still here.

“What, there’s still something you can do?”

Oh, yes! That’s the thing about plans—you always want to think two or three moves ahead. Geese and I were able to anticipate that the Sword God and Alec would act like fools and charge in ahead. We have another plan.

“And are you sure we’ll win with this plan?”

Bwahahaha! Haven’t you been listening? There’s no such thing as a plan that’s guaranteed to win! On that note, our first plan aimed for a total victory, but this next one...doesn’t. The next-best plan is what comes after the best plan, you know!

“Don’t piss me off. Answer the question. Will it win or won’t it?”

We ought to be able to satisfy the conditions for victory, even if the victory is not total.

“You’d better.”

Well, even if I didn’t have another plan, I’d simply fight with everything I have.

“That would be pointless.”

Bwahahaha! That sort of thinking is why you’re in this mess!

“...And what’s that supposed to mean?”

Geese will give everything he has for you, and I mean to do the same. I don’t know about the Abyssal King, but let us assume he, too, gave everything he had. But what of the Sword God and the North God? What of the Ogre God? The Sword God and North God rushed in too soon. But if they had given all they have for you, if they had trusted you and us, whom you trust, what do you think would have happened then? Mightn’t they not have panicked and rushed in when they heard the Abyssal King had been killed?

The Ogre God said that the ogres were taken hostage. His job is to protect the ogres. As their leader, it is his duty. So when they were taken

hostage, he had no choice but to prioritize them. But what if he had decided to give everything for you? Say he had cast aside his title of Ogre God and fought for you as just another warrior from the start. Wouldn't he have continued to fight in your name, even after the ogres were taken hostage?

“...I don’t...there’s no point in ‘what-if’s.’”

Bwahahaha! Life is one ‘what-if’ after another! People do things for one another and help others without hope of reward in order to turn those ‘what-if’s into reality! Indeed, just like Rudeus Greyrat does!

“You’re telling me to copy him?”

Your interpretations of what I said are no concern of mine. However, I shall give you a word of advice before I go. It’s not fair for me to always be the one taking your advice, now, is it? I am the Wise Demon King! I should return the favor every once in a while!

“Like I want your—”

Geese and I will likely die in this battle. But the fight will continue. And even if we win, it will not mean a total end to the fighting. You can see the future, so you think if you see yourself smiling in the end, that means you will have won. But others will come to threaten that shining future of yours. So hear me: if you want to have the last laugh, pay heed to the hearts of men.

“‘The hearts of men’? That’s the stupidest thing—”

And now, I bid thee farewell! Bwahahaha! Bwa, bwa, bwaaahahahahahahaha!

Interlude: I Wanted to Be a Hero

EVER SINCE I WAS LITTLE, I dreamed of being a hero. Old tales from my father and my grandmother were my inspiration there, as you might've guessed. From my father, I heard the legend of North God Kalman, the little-known champion. From my grandmother, I heard the legend of the fearful demon king named Atoferatofe. Together, it was the tale of a champion and a demon king. A demon king was born powerful, was a ruler, and had no peer when it came to viciousness. A champion was born weak but overcame many trials to strike down the vicious demon king. North God Kalman and Atoferatofe embodied this idealized pairing. My father told me how precious that connection between champion and demon king was. North God Kalman the champion wasn't strong, by any means. Possessing slightly more skill than most, he'd set up his own school, but he was still never anything more than a commonplace warrior. Despite that, he waged a hopeless war for peace. That was the sort of era it was. He couldn't have lived with himself otherwise. The only reason they called him a hero was because he faced the final battle and survived it. No one would have remembered his name if he hadn't. Having said that, the fight—the Laplace War—was such a terrible war that just surviving could be counted as an achievement. Many people fought and died ugly deaths in that war. Human, beast, elf, dwarf, halfling, or demon, they all died. That meant everyone who survived was great, or so my father said. He told me it was a time when you needed all your strength and your wits just to survive. My grandmother seemed to agree with him. My grandmother didn't die in the battle, but she was sealed away partway through. "What would you call those who achieved the great feat of ending the war in such an era, if not heroes?" my father would say passionately.

My favorite story was a different one. A different hero with the same name: the tale of the Second North God Kalman. The second Kalman set off on a journey to make the name of North God Kalman, a true champion, known throughout the world. In his travels, he helped people and defeated great enemies. He wasn't righteous, not by any means. He wasn't resolved

to help people or snuff out evil. It just so happened that he ended up helping people and nations. He earned the gratitude of many, but he fought only for the name of North God Kalman...and by the same token, to show off his own strength. He had no reason to fight, nor any demon king to slay. He fought only for himself. And ultimately, he became known as the greatest warrior.

Yes, there was a time when no one disputed that Second North God Kalman was the greatest warrior alive. He managed to pull that off. Because of that, I thought that he really *was* a hero. He was the coolest person in the whole world, so I looked up to him. My father told me I wasn't to be like the second North God. He only told me the story because it made me happy. He wasn't proud of it, not in the slightest. If anything, my father heaped far more praise on the First North God. "He was *really* amazing, *really* noble," he'd say.

It was the Second North God who stayed with me in my heart. It was the Second North God who I wanted to be like. Lying in bed before I went to sleep, it was he who I imagined becoming. I'd fight like the Second North God and eventually become a hero.

When I realized I had a talent, my dreams grew closer to reality. I had a knack for sword fighting. So strong was my grasp of sword fighting that I sensed my own great potential. Because of that, I thought—without basis, it turns out—I could defeat the Second North God. I should have been able to.

I put everything I had into it. I had more than enough potential.

So why did it end up like this?

Now, total darkness covered my vision. My body was being squeezed hard and there was a ringing, like when you cover your ears with your hands. My limbs wouldn't move at all, and my awareness was hazy. The pressure on my body hurt. If I weren't me, maybe I'd already have been crushed to death. I couldn't do anything, not even twitch. It was agony to breathe, but my body was tough. I could tell this wasn't enough to kill me. Maybe because I couldn't move, my thoughts wouldn't stop racing.

I once heard the story of how my grandmother was sealed away. My grandmother was a brute, and people of her race didn't die easily, so she'd been sealed away numerous times. My father liked to say he'd seal *me*

away if I was naughty. They'd have my grandmother tell me about the time she spent sealed away. Grandmother told the story with a scowl.

She said she got better at talking, but she lost the use of her body and the power of speech. Her thoughts grew dull and her usual urge to wreak havoc was forcibly suppressed. She said it was absolutely humiliating. I bet she felt just like I did now.

I lost.

I lost to the follower of Dragon God Orsted, "Quagmire Rudeus." I never should have lost to such an opponent. Rudeus was a fainthearted, lily-livered, spineless rat. The sort to surround himself with safety nets. A guy who couldn't take a fight. He thought he was so clever, when all he had was low cunning. He was the type to be so overconfident in his own plans that he got sucked into them and died.

...No, that's not right. He *was* spineless, but he wasn't without resolve. He showed me that at the end. He came out and fought. He fought me one-on-one. I was gravely wounded, but even then, the odds were in my favor. He must have known that, yet he still stood up to me. He knew getting that close could be fatal, but he stood tall and struck true. I didn't think he had it in him. I misread him, and lost because of it. I had to admit that.

Rudeus Greyrat was a warrior. Maybe it was guys like him who were the real heroes. A little cowardly, a man who couldn't survive without the help of others, working out convoluted strategies, scurrying around as fainthearted as a mouse. Underneath that cowardice, he harbored hidden courage.

Someone with the guts to fight with all their strength against an opponent they have no hope of defeating... Yes, just like the First North God.

Okay...I see now. Perhaps I misunderstood some things about strength. I thought a hero only had to be strong. What is strength, really? Could you call yourself strong for fighting and defeating opponents weaker than yourself? I could've surpassed the Second North God. I could've become history's greatest North God Kalman. That wasn't worth questioning; I *knew* I could. What would it matter? When you achieved something you knew you could do all along, what does that mean?

A true hero fights battles even when he doesn't know if he can win. It's by achieving an impossible task that you become a hero. Like how the First North God Kalman reformed Demon King Atoferatofe. Like how the Second North God Kalman slew terrible enemies beyond mortal comprehension across the world. Like how Quagmire Rudeus defeated the Third North God Kalman.

You had to do something that, at first glance, seemed beyond you. Yes, exactly. That's why I lost to Rudeus. This time he was the champion, and I was the demon king. Just like the demon kings of history, I'd sneered at the champion and treated his allies like insects. Too proud to unleash my full power, I'd been defeated. Rudeus Greyrat was a champion—a hero. It was hard to shake the impression, looking at him in the flesh, that he was just a pitiful small-timer, and so you ended up underestimating him. He did great things. They'll surely call him a hero in ages to come. I got it wrong. I would have had to do everything in my power to crush him from the get-go if I wanted to stand a chance. Like a fool, I thought I'd knock him off without really trying because the *next* battle was the real one. I should have known. Ever since I was a child, I'd heard the story, over and over again, of the demon king who lost making exactly this mistake. How could I have forgotten something so simple? I wanted to go back in time and punch myself.

I was wrong, and that's how I ended up paralyzed in a place like this.

...Was I going to die here? Maybe because I had a lot of my grandmother's blood, I was tough. I'm not so easily destroyed, not even buried in the ground like this. Only, unlike Grandmother, I wasn't immortal. If I stayed paralyzed like this, eventually I'd die. Either from starvation or something else. *I suppose this is how it ends for a reckless fool...*

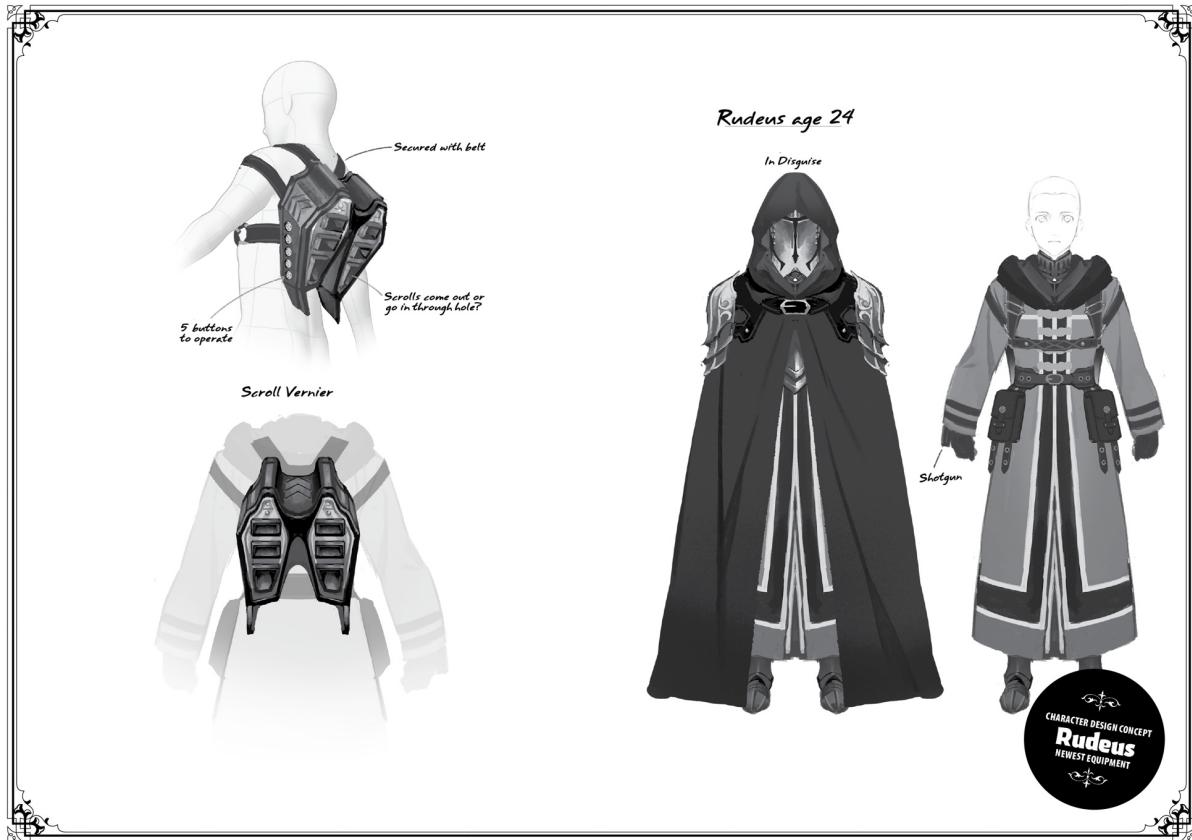
“I don't want to die...”

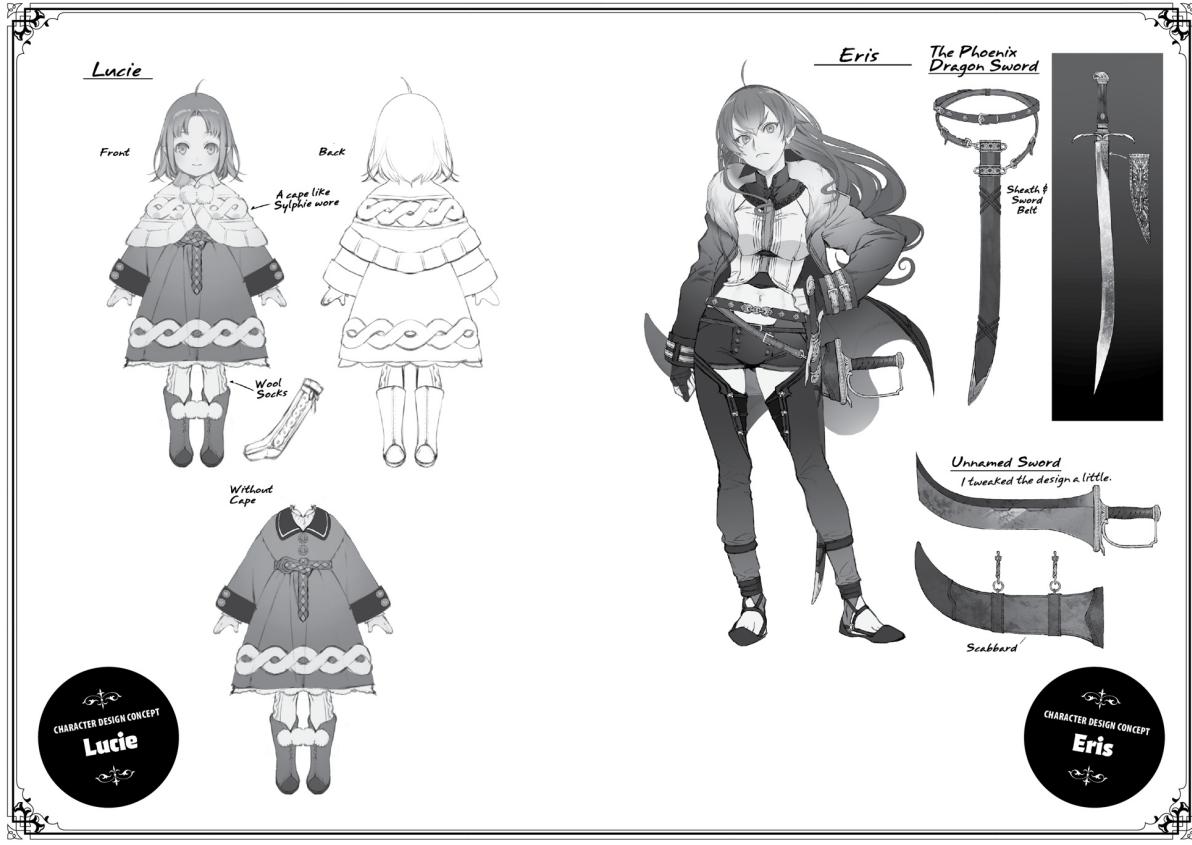
It's well enough to die when you're defeated. I could accept it. That's the nature of battle. I tried to always accept my death—but only after I'd fought with everything I had. I hadn't done that. I hadn't been serious. That wouldn't happen next time. Next time, I wouldn't hold back. I'd fight with my full strength from start to finish. I'd do my utmost in every battle, like a

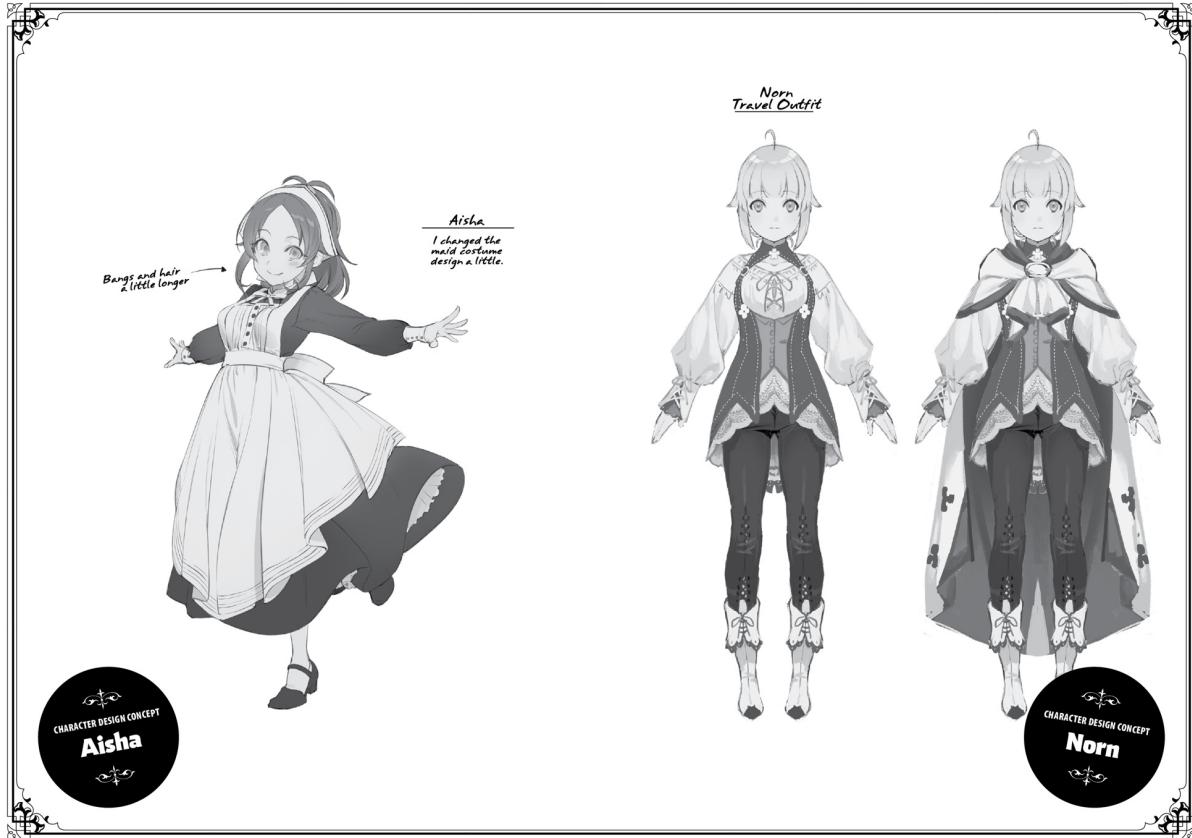
champion, like a hero, like a man worthy of the name North God Kalman. I swore it on my sword, on the gods, on my grandfather, the great First North God Kalman.

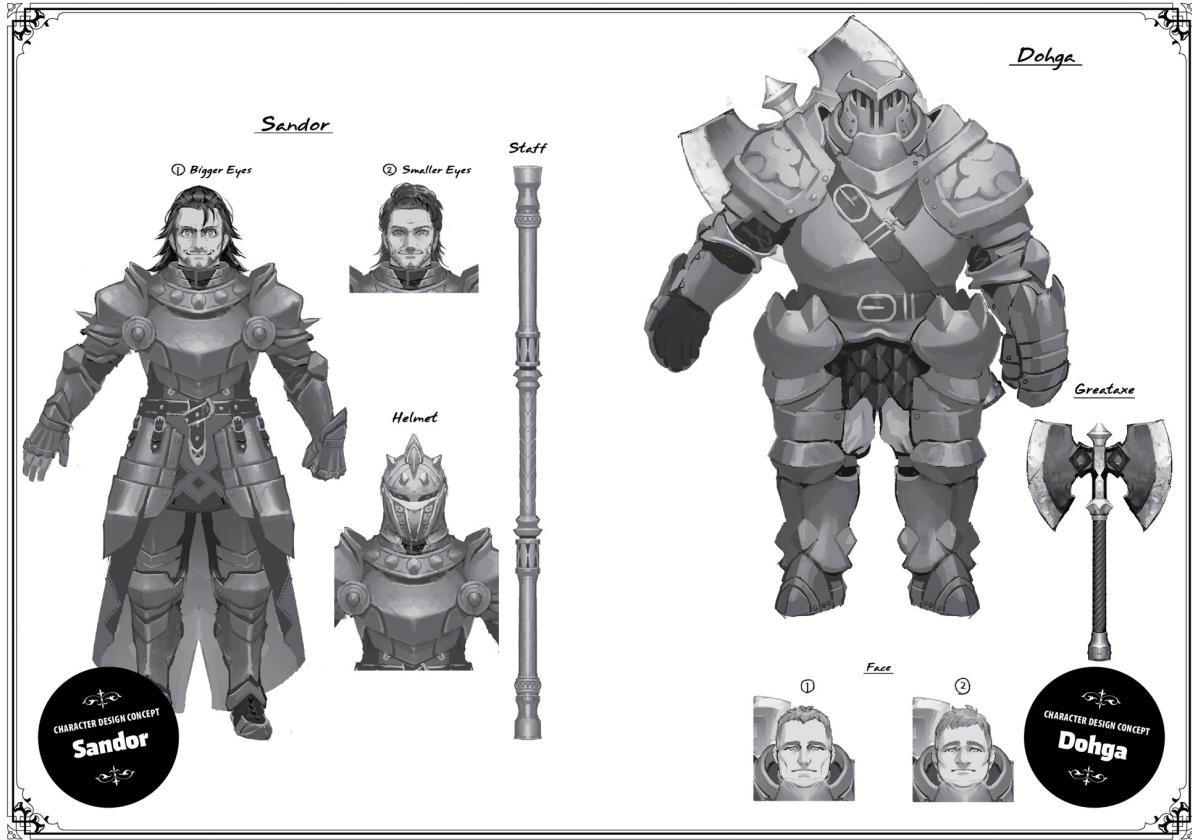
So someone, please. Find a way to give me another chance.

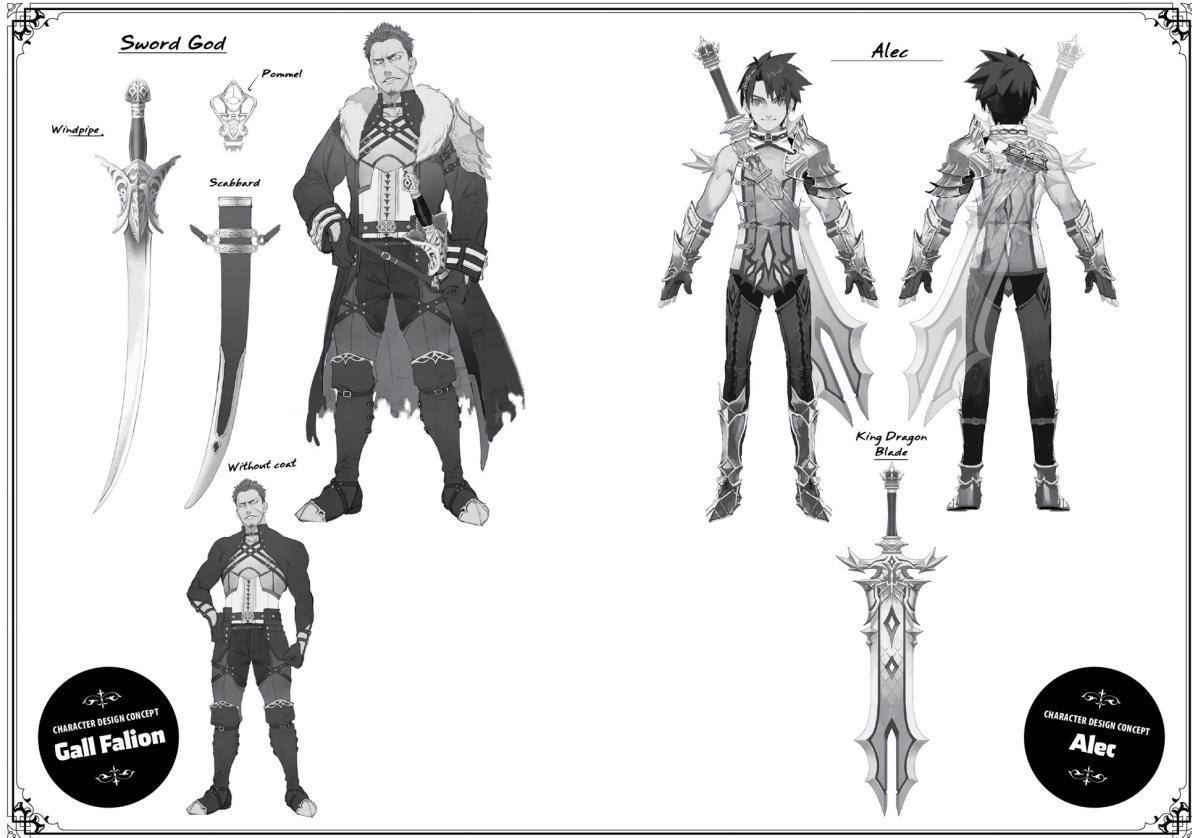
Even as I kept wishing that, over and over again, I felt my consciousness fading...

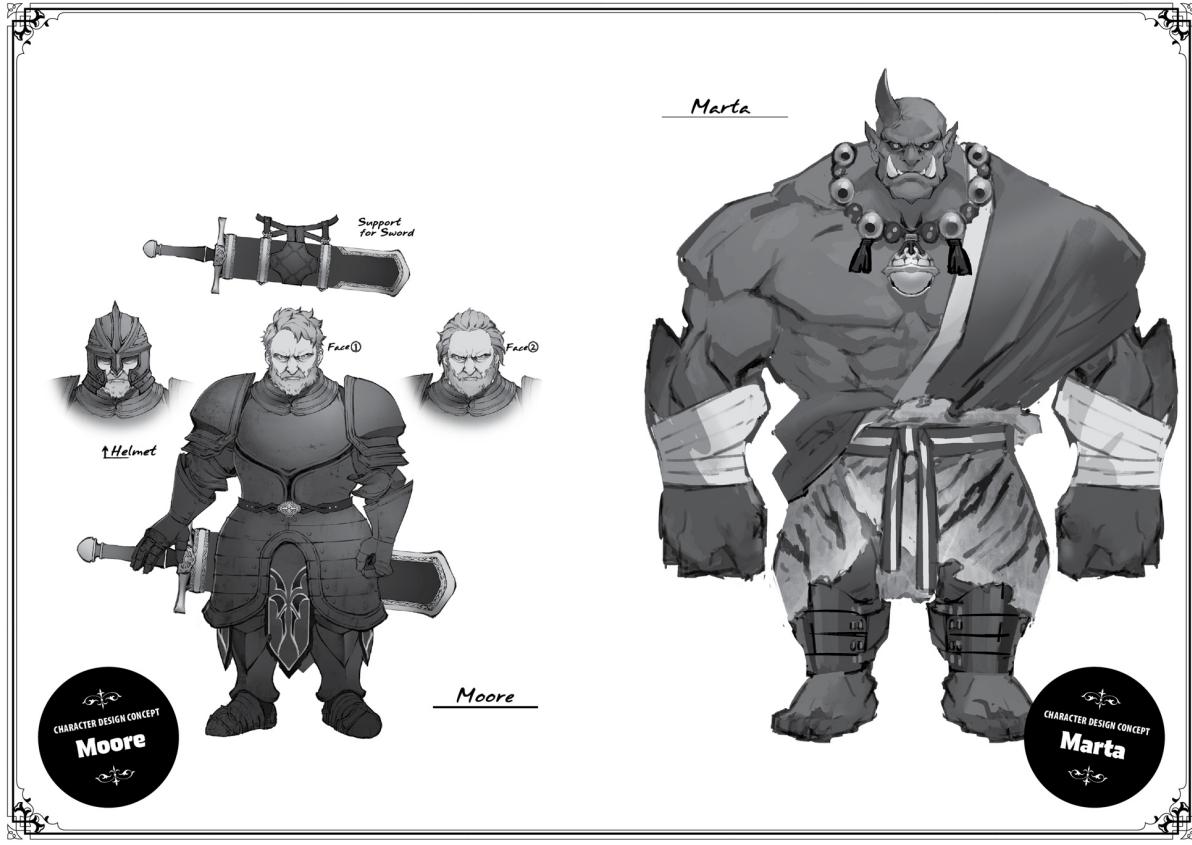












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Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's be Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, hitting number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within one year of publication.

“Volume 25. Almost there,” said the author.



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